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NOVELS

OF

SIR EDWARD BULWER LYTTON

Library Edition

THE CAXTON NOVELS

VOL. V.

"MY NOVEL"

By Pisistratus Caxton

OR

VARIETIES IN ENGLISH LIFE

> "Neque enim notare singulos mens est mihi,
> Verum ipsam vitam et mores hominum ostendere."
> PHÆDRUS

[24]

LIBRARY EDITION—IN FOUR VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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MY NOVEL.

CHAPTER IX.

On entering the drawing-room, Randal found the two ladies seated close together, in a position much more appropriate to the familiarity of their school-days than to the politeness of the friendship now existing between them. Mrs Hazeldean's hand hung affectionately over Carry's shoulder, and both those fair English faces were bent over the same book. It was pretty to see these sober matrons, so different from each other in character and aspect, thus unconsciously restored to the intimacy of happy maiden youth by the golden link of some Magician from the still land of Truth or Fancy—brought together in heart, as each eye rested on the same thought;—closer and closer, as sympathy, lost in the actual world, grew out of that world which unites in one bond of feeling the readers of some gentle book.

"And what work interests you so much?" asked Randal, pausing by the table.

"One you have read, of course," replied Mrs Dale, putting a book-mark embroidered by herself into the page, and handing the volume to Randal. "It has made a great sensation, I believe."

Randal glanced at the title of the work. "True," said he, "I have heard much of it in London, but I have not yet had time to read it."

Mrs Dale.—"I can lend it to you, if you like to look over it to-night, and you can leave it for me with Mrs Hazeldean."

Parson (approaching).—"Oh! that book!—yes, you must read it. I do not know a work more instructive."

Randal.—"Instructive! Certainly, I will read it then. But I thought it was a mere work of amusement—of fancy. It seems so as I look over it."

Parson.—"So is the *Vicar of Wakefield;* yet what book more instructive?"

Randal.—"I should not have said *that* of the *Vicar of Wakefield.* A pretty book enough, though the story is most improbable. But how is it instructive?"

Parson.—"By its results; it leaves us happier and better. What can any instruction do more? Some works instruct through the head, some through the heart. The last reach the widest circle, and often produce the most genial influence on the character. This book belongs to the last. You will grant my proposition when you have read it."

Randal smiled, and took the volume.

Mrs Dale.—"Is the author known yet?"

Randal.—"I have heard it ascribed to many writers, but I believe no one has claimed it."

Parson.—"I think it must have been written by my old college-friend, Professor Moss, the naturalist—its descriptions of scenery are so accurate."

Mrs Dale.—"La, Charles, dear! that snuffy, tiresome, prosy professor? How can you talk such nonsense? I am sure the author must be young—there is so much freshness of feeling."

Mrs Hazeldean (positively). — "Yes, certainly young."

Parson (no less positively).—"I should say just the contrary. Its tone is too serene, and its style too simple, for a young man. Besides, I don't know any young man who would send me his book, and this book has been sent me—very handsomely bound, too, you see. Depend upon it, Moss is the man—quite his turn of mind."

Mrs Dale.—"You are too provoking, Charles, dear! Mr Moss is so remarkably plain, too."

Randal.—"Must an author be handsome?"

Parson.—"Ha! ha! Answer that if you can, Carry."

Carry remained mute and disdainful.

Squire (with great *naïveté*).—"Well, I don't think there's much in the book, whoever wrote it; for I've read it myself, and understand every word of it."

Mrs Dale.—"I don't see why you should suppose it was written by a man at all. For my part, I think it must be a woman."

Mrs Hazeldean.—"Yes, there's a passage about maternal affection, which only a woman could have written."

Parson.—"Pooh! pooh! I should like to see a woman who could have written that description of an August evening before a thunderstorm; every wild-flower in the hedgerow exactly the flowers of August—every sign in the air exactly those of the month. Bless you! a woman would have filled the hedge with violets and cowslips. Nobody else but my friend Moss could have written that description."

Squire.—"I don't know; there's a simile about the waste of corn-seed in hand-sowing, which makes me think he must be a farmer."

Mrs Dale (scornfully).—"A farmer! In hob-nailed shoes, I suppose! I say it is a woman."

Mrs Hazeldean.—"A woman, and a mother!"

Parson.—"A middle-aged man, and a naturalist."

Squire.—"No, no, Parson—certainly a young man; for that love-scene puts me in mind of my own young days, when I would have given my ears to tell Harry how handsome I thought her; and all I could say was, 'Fine weather for the crops, Miss.' Yes, a young man and a farmer. I should not wonder if he had held the plough himself."

Randal (who had been turning over the pages).—"This sketch of Night in London comes from a man who has lived the life of cities and looked at wealth with the eyes of poverty. Not bad! I will read the book."

"Strange," said the Parson, smiling, "that this little work should so have entered into our minds, suggested to all of us different ideas, yet equally charmed all—given a new and fresh current to our dull country life—animated us as with the sight of a world in our breasts we had never seen before, save in dreams; a little work like this, by a man we don't know, and never may! Well, *that* knowledge *is* power, and a noble one!"

"A sort of power, certainly, sir," said Randal, candidly; and that night, when Randal retired to his own room, he suspended his schemes and projects, and read, as he rarely did, without an object to gain by the reading.

The work surprised him by the pleasure it gave. Its charm lay in the writer's calm enjoyment of the beautiful. It seemed like some happy soul sunning itself in the light of its own thoughts. Its power was so tranquil and even, that it was only a critic who could perceive how much force and vigour were necessary to sustain the wing that floated aloft with so imperceptible an effort. There was no one faculty predominating tyrannically over the others; all seemed proportioned in the felicitous symmetry of a nature rounded, integral, and complete. And when the work was closed, it left behind it a tender warmth, that played round the heart of the reader, and vivified feelings which seemed unknown before. Randal laid down the book softly ; and for five minutes the ignoble and base purposes to which his own knowledge was applied stood before him, naked and unmasked.

"Tut !" said he, wrenching himself violently away from the benign influence, "it was not to sympathise with Hector, but to conquer with Achilles, that Alexander of Macedon kept Homer under his pillow. Such should be the true use of books to him who has the practical world to subdue ; let parsons and women construe it otherwise as they may."

And the Principle of Evil descended again upon the intellect, from which the guide of Beneficence was gone.

CHAPTER X.

Randal rose at the sound of the first breakfast-bell, and on the staircase met Mrs Hazeldean. He gave her back the book; and as he was about to speak, she beckoned to him to follow her into a little morning-room appropriated to herself. No boudoir of white and gold, with pictures by Watteau, but lined with large walnut-tree presses, that held the old heir-loom linen, strewed with lavender—stores for the housekeeper, and medicines for the poor.

Seating herself on a large chair in this sanctum, Mrs Hazeldean looked formidably at home.

"Pray," said the lady, coming at once to the point, with her usual straightforward candour, "what is all this you have been saying to my husband as to the possibility of Frank's marrying a foreigner?"

Randal.—"Would you be as averse to such a notion as Mr Hazeldean is?"

Mrs Hazeldean.—"You ask me a question, instead of answering mine."

Randal was greatly put out in his fence by these rude thrusts. For indeed he had a double purpose to serve—first, thoroughly to know if Frank's marriage with a woman like Madame di Negra would irritate the Squire sufficiently to endanger the son's inheritance; and, secondly, to prevent Mr and Mrs Hazeldean believing seriously that such a marriage was to be apprehended, lest they should prematurely address Frank on the subject, and frustrate the marriage itself. Yet, withal, he must so express himself, that he could not be afterwards accused by the parents of disguising matters. In his talk to the Squire the preceding day, he had gone a little too far—farther than he would have done but for his desire of escaping the cattle-shed and short-horns. While he mused, Mrs Hazeldean observed him with her honest sensible eyes, and finally exclaimed—

"Out with it, Mr Leslie!"

"Out with what, my dear madam? The Squire has sadly exaggerated the importance of what was said mainly in jest. But I will own to you plainly, that Frank has appeared to me a little smitten with a certain fair Italian."

"Italian!" cried Mrs Hazeldean. "Well, I said so from the first. Italian!—that's all, is it?" and she smiled.

Randal was more and more perplexed. The pupil of his eye contracted, as it does when we retreat into ourselves, and think, watch, and keep guard.

"And perhaps," resumed Mrs Hazeldean, with a very sunny expression of countenance, "You have noticed this in Frank since he was here?"

"It is true," murmured Randal; "but I think his heart or his fancy was touched even before."

"Very natural," said Mrs Hazeldean; "how could he help it?—such a beautiful creature! Well, I must not ask you to tell Frank's secrets; but I guess the object of attraction; and though she will have no fortune to speak of—and it is not such a match as he might form—still she is so amiable, and has been so well brought up, and is so little like one's general notions of a Roman Catholic, that I think I could persuade Hazeldean into giving his consent."

"Ah," said Randal, drawing a long breath, and beginning with his practised acuteness to detect Mrs Hazeldean's error, "I am very much relieved and rejoiced to hear this; and I may venture to give Frank some hope, if I find him disheartened and desponding, poor fellow!"

"I think you may," replied Mrs Hazeldean, laughing pleasantly. "But you should not have frightened poor William so, hinting that the lady knew very little English. She has an accent, to be sure; but she speaks our tongue very prettily. I always forget that she is not English born! Ha, ha, poor William!"

Randal.—"Ha, ha!"

Mrs Hazeldean.—"We had once thought of another match for Frank—a girl of good English family."

Randal.—"Miss Sticktorights?"

Mrs Hazeldean.—"No; that's an old whim of Hazeldean's. But I doubt if the Sticktorights would ever merge their property in ours. Bless you, it would be all off the moment they came to settlements, and had to give up the right of way. We thought of a very different match; but there's no dictating to young hearts, Mr Leslie."

RANDAL.—"Indeed no, Mrs Hazeldean. But since we now understand each other so well, excuse me if I suggest that you had better leave things to themselves, and not write to Frank on the subject. Young hearts, you know, are often stimulated by apparent difficulties, and grow cool when the obstacle vanishes."

MRS HAZELDEAN.—"Very possibly; it was not so with Hazeldean and me. But I shall not write to Frank on the subject, for a different reason—though I would consent to the match, and so would William; yet we both would rather, after all, that Frank married an Englishwoman, and a Protestant. We will not, therefore, do anything to encourage the idea. But if Frank's happiness becomes really at stake, *then* we will step in. In short, we would neither encourage nor oppose. You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"And in the meanwhile, it is quite right that Frank should see the world, and try to distract his mind, or at least to know it. And I dare say it has been some thought of that kind which has prevented his coming here."

Randal, dreading a farther and plainer *éclaircissement*, now rose, and saying, "Pardon me, but I must hurry over breakfast, and be back in time to catch the coach"—offered his arm to his hostess, and led her into the breakfast-parlour. Devouring his meal, as if in great haste, he then mounted his horse, and, taking cordial leave of his entertainers, trotted briskly away.

All things favoured his project—even chance had befriended him in Mrs Hazeldean's mistake. She had, not unnaturally, supposed Violante to have captivated Frank on his last visit to the Hall. Thus, while Randal had certified his own mind that nothing could more exasperate the Squire than an alliance with Madame di Negra, he could yet assure Frank that Mrs Hazeldean was all on his side. And when the error was discovered, Mrs Hazeldean would only have to blame herself for it. Still more successful had his diplomacy proved with the Riccaboccas: he had ascertained the secret he had come to discover; he should induce the Italian to remove to the neighbourhood of London; and if Violante were the great heiress he suspected her to prove, whom else of her own age would she see but him? And the old Leslie domains, to be sold in two years—a portion of the dowry might purchase them! Flushed by the triumph of his craft, all former vacillations of conscience ceased. In high and fervent spirits he passed the Casino, the garden of which was solitary and deserted, reached his home, and, telling Oliver to be studious, and Juliet to be patient, walked thence to meet the coach and regain the capital.

CHAPTER XI.

Violante was seated in her own little room, and looking from the window on the terrace that stretched below. The day was warm for the time of year. The orange-trees had been removed under shelter for the approach of winter; but where they had stood sat Mrs Riccabocca at work. In the Belvidere, Riccabocca himself was conversing with his favourite servant. But the casements and the door of the Belvidere were open; and where they sat, both wife and daughter could see the Padrone leaning against the wall, with his arms folded, and his eyes fixed on the floor; while Jackeymo, with one finger on his master's arm, was talking to him with visible earnestness. And the daughter from the window, and the wife from her work, directed tender anxious eyes towards the still thoughtful form so dear to both. For the last day or two, Riccabocca had been peculiarly abstracted, even to gloom. Each felt there was something stirring at his heart—neither, as yet, knew what.

Violante's room silently revealed the nature of the education by which her character had been formed. Save a sketch-book, which lay open on a desk at hand,

and which showed talent exquisitely taught (for in this Riccabocca had been her teacher), there was nothing that spoke of the ordinary female accomplishments. No piano stood open, no harp occupied yon nook, which seemed made for one; no broidery-frame, nor implements of work, betrayed the usual and graceful resources of a girl; but ranged on shelves against the wall were the best writers in English, Italian, and French; and these betokened an extent of reading, that he who wishes for a companion to his mind in the sweet commune of woman, which softens and refines all it gives and takes in interchange, will never condemn as masculine. You had but to look into Violante's face to see how noble was the intelligence that brought soul to those lovely features. Nothing hard, nothing dry and stern was there. Even as you detected knowledge, it was lost in the gentleness of grace. In fact, whatever she gained in the graver kinds of information, became transmuted, through her heart and her fancy, into spiritual golden stores. Give her some tedious and arid history, her imagination seized upon beauties other readers had passed by, and, like the eye of the artist, detected everywhere the Picturesque. Something in her mind seemed to reject all that was mean and commonplace, and to bring out all that was rare and elevated in whatever it received. Living so apart from all companions of her age, she scarcely belonged to the Present time. She dwelt in the Past, as Sabrina in her crystal well. Images of chivalry—of the Beautiful and the Heroic—such as, in reading the silvery line of Tasso, rise before us, softening force and valour into love and song—haunted the reveries of the fair Italian maid.

Tell us not that the Past, examined by cold Philosophy, was no better and no loftier than the Present: it is not thus seen by pure and generous eyes. Let the Past perish, when it ceases to reflect on its magic mirror the beautiful Romance which is its noblest reality, though perchance but the shadow of Delusion.

Yet Violante was not merely the dreamer. In her, life was so puissant and rich, that action seemed necessary to its glorious development—action, but still in the woman's sphere—action to bless and to refine and to exalt all around her, and to pour whatever else of ambition was left unsatisfied into sympathy with the aspirations of man. Despite her father's fears of the bleak air of England, in that air she had strengthened the delicate health of her childhood. Her elastic step —her eyes full of sweetness and light—her bloom, at once soft and luxuriant—all spoke of the vital powers fit to sustain a mind of such exquisite mould, and the emotions of a heart that, once aroused, could ennoble the passions of the South with the purity and devotion of the North.

Solitude makes some natures more timid, some more bold. Violante was fearless. When she spoke, her eyes frankly met your own; and she was so ignorant of evil, that as yet she seemed nearly unacquainted with shame. From this courage, combined with affluence of idea, came a delightful flow of happy converse.

Though possessing so imperfectly the accomplishments ordinarily taught to young women, and which may be cultured to the utmost, and yet leave the thoughts so barren, and the talk so vapid—she had that accomplishment which most pleases the taste, and commands the love, of the man of talent; especially if his talent be not so actively employed as to make him desire only relaxation where he seeks companionship—the accomplishment of facility in intellectual interchange—the charm that clothes in musical words beautiful womanly ideas.

"I hear him sigh at this distance," said Violante, softly, as she still watched her father; "and methinks this is a new grief; and not for his country. He spoke twice yesterday of that dear English friend, and wished that he were here."

As she said this, unconsciously the virgin blushed, her hands drooped on her knee, and she fell herself into thought as profound as her father's, but less gloomy. From her arrival in England, Violante had been taught a grateful interest in the name of Harley L'Estrange. Her father, preserving a silence that seemed disdain, of all his old Italian intimates, had been pleased to converse with open heart of the Englishman who had saved where countrymen had betrayed. He spoke of the soldier, then in the full bloom of youth, who, unconsoled by fame, had nursed the memory of some hidden sorrow amidst the pine-trees that cast their shadow over the sunny Italian lake; how Riccabocca, then honoured and happy, had courted from his seclusion the English Signore, then the mourner and the voluntary exile; how they had grown friends amidst the landscapes in which her eyes had opened to the day; how Harley had vainly warned him from the rash schemes in which he had sought to reconstruct in an hour the ruins of weary ages; how, when abandoned, deserted, proscribed, pursued, he had fled for life—the infant Violante clasped to his bosom—the English soldier had given him refuge, baffled the pursuers, armed his servants, accompanied the fugitive at night towards the defile in the Apennines, and, when the emissaries of a perfidious enemy, hot in the chase, came near, had said, "You have your child to save! Fly on! Another league, and you are beyond the borders. We will delay the foes with parley; they will not harm us." And not till escape was gained did the father know that the English friend had delayed the foe, not by parley, but by the sword, holding the pass against numbers, with a breast as dauntless as Bayard's on the glorious bridge.

And since then, the same Englishman had never ceased to vindicate his name, to urge his cause; and if hope yet remained of restoration to land and honours, it was in that untiring zeal.

Hence, naturally and insensibly, this secluded and musing girl had associated all that she read in tales of romance and chivalry with the image of the brave and loyal stranger. He it was who animated her dreams of the Past, and seemed born to be, in the destined hour, the deliverer of the Future. Around this image grouped all the charms that the fancy of virgin woman can raise from the enchanted lore of old Heroic Fable. Once in her early girlhood, her father (to satisfy her curiosity, eager for general description) had drawn from memory a sketch of the features of the Englishman—drawn Harley, as he was in that first youth, flattered and idealised, no doubt, by art, and by partial gratitude—but still resembling him as he was then; while the deep mournfulness of recent sorrow yet shadowed and concentrated all the varying expressions of his countenance; and to look on him was to say—"So sad, yet so young!" Never did Violante pause to remember that the same years which ripened herself from infancy into woman, were passing less gently over that smooth cheek and dreamy brow—that the world might be altering the nature as time the aspect. To her the hero of the Ideal remained immortal in bloom and youth. Bright illusion, common to us all, where Poetry once hallows the human form! Who ever thinks of Petrarch as the old time-worn man? Who does not see him as when he first gazed on Laura?—

"Ogni altra cosa ogni pensier va fore;
E sol ivi con voi rimansi Amore!"

CHAPTER XII.

And Violante, thus absorbed in reverie, forgot to keep watch on the Belvidere. And the Belvidere was now deserted. The wife, who had no other ideal to distract *her* thoughts, saw Riccabocca pass into the house.

The exile entered his daughter's room, and she started to feel his hand upon her locks and his kiss upon her brow.

"My child!" cried Riccabocca, seating himself, "I have resolved to leave for a time this retreat, and to seek the neighbourhood of London."

"Ah, dear father, *that*, then, was your thought? But what can be your reason? Do not turn away; you know how carefully I have obeyed your command and kept your secret. Ah, you will confide in me."

"I do, indeed," returned Riccabocca with emotion, "I leave this place, in the fear lest my enemies discover me. I shall say to others that you are of an age to require teachers, not to be obtained here. But I should like none to know where we go."

The Italian said these last words through his teeth, and hanging his head. He said them in shame.

"My mother"—(so Violante always called Jemima)—"my mother—you have spoken to her?"

"Not yet. *There* is the difficulty."

"No difficulty, for she loves you so well," replied Violante, with soft reproach. "Ah, why not also confide in her? Who so true? so good?"

"Good—I grant it!" exclaimed Riccabocca. "What then? '*Da cattiva Donna guardati, ed alla buona non fidar niente*' (from the bad woman, guard thyself; to the good woman trust nothing). And if you must trust," added the abominable man, "trust her with anything but a secret!"

"Fie," said Violante, with arch reproach, for she knew her father's humours too well to interpret his horrible sentiments literally—"fie on your consistency, *Padre carissimo.* Do you not trust your secret to me?"

"You! A kitten is not a cat, and a girl is not a woman. Besides, the secret was already known to you, and I had no choice. Peace, Jemima will stay here for the present. See to what you wish to take with you; we shall leave to-night."

Not waiting for an answer, Riccabocca hurried away, and with a firm step strode the terrace, and approached his wife.

"*Anima mia,*" said the pupil of Machiavelli, disguising in the tenderest words the cruellest intentions—for one of his most cherished Italian proverbs was to the effect, that there is no getting on with a mule or a woman unless you coax them.—"*Anima mia,* soul of my being, you have already seen that Violante mopes herself to death here."

"She, poor child! Oh no!"

"She does, core of my heart—she does—and is as ignorant of music as I am of tent-stitch."

"She sings beautifully."

"Just as birds do, against all the rules, and in defiance of gamut. Therefore, to come to the point, O treasure of my soul! I am going to take her with me for a short time, perhaps to Cheltenham or Brighton. We shall see."

"All places with you are the same to me, Alphonso. When shall we go?"

"We shall go to-night; but terrible as it is to part from you—you——"

"Ah!" interrupted the wife, and covered her face with her hands.

Riccabocca, the wiliest and most relentless of men in his maxims, melted into absolute uxorial imbecility at the sight of that mute distress. He put his arm round his wife's waist, with genuine affection, and without a single proverb at his heart—"*Carissima*, do not grieve so; we shall be back soon, and travelling is expensive; rolling stones gather no moss, and there is so much to see to at home."

Mrs Riccabocca gently escaped from her husband's arm. She withdrew her hands from her face and brushed away the tears that stood in her eyes.

"Alphonso," she said touchingly, "hear me! What you think good, that shall ever be good to me. But do not think that I grieve solely because of our parting. No; I grieve to think that, despite all these years in which I have been the partner of your hearth, and slept on your breast—all these years in which I have had no thought but, however humbly, to do my duty to you and yours, and could have wished that you had read my heart, and seen there but yourself and your child—I grieve to think that you still deem me as unworthy your trust as when you stood by my side at the altar."

"Trust!" repeated Riccabocca, startled and conscience-stricken: "why do you say 'trust?' In what have I distrusted you? I am sure," he continued, with the artful volubility of guilt, "that I never doubted your fidelity—hook-nosed, long-visaged foreigner though I be; never pryed into your letters; never inquired into your solitary walks; never heeded your flirtations with that good-looking Parson Dale; never kept the money; and never looked into the account-books!" Mrs Riccabocca refused even a smile of contempt at these revolting evasions; nay, she seemed scarcely to hear them.

"Can you think," she resumed, pressing her hand on her heart to still its struggles for relief in sobs—"can you think that I could have watched, and thought, and taxed my poor mind so constantly, to conjecture what might best soothe or please you, and not seen long since, that you have secrets known to your daughter—your servant—not to me? Fear not—the secrets cannot be evil, or you would not tell them to your innocent child. Besides, do I not know your nature? and do I not love you because I know it?—it is for something connected with those secrets that you leave your home. You think that I should be incautious—imprudent. You will not take me with you. Be it so. I go to prepare for your departure. Forgive me if I have displeased you, husband."

Mrs Riccabocca turned away; but a soft hand touched the Italian's arm. "O father, can you resist this! Trust her! trust her!—I am a woman like her! I answer for her woman's faith. Be yourself — ever nobler than all others, my own father."

"*Diavolo!* Never one door shuts but another opens," groaned Riccabocca. "Are you a fool, child? Don't you see that it was for your sake only I feared—and would be cautious?"

"For mine! O then do not make me deem myself mean, and the cause of meanness. For mine! Am I not your daughter—the descendant of men who never feared?"

Violante looked sublime while she spoke; and as she ended she led her father gently on towards the door, which his wife had now gained.

"Jemima—wife mine!—pardon, pardon," cried the Italian, whose heart had been yearning to repay such tenderness and devotion,—"come back to my breast—it has been long closed—it shall be open to you now and for ever."

In another moment the wife was in her right place—on her husband's bosom; and Violante, beautiful peacemaker, stood smiling awhile at both, and then lifted her eyes gratefully to Heaven, and stole away.

CHAPTER XIII.

On Randal's return to town, he heard mixed and contradictory rumours in the streets, and at the clubs, of the probable downfall of the government at the approaching session of Parliament. These rumours had sprung up suddenly, as if in an hour. True that, for some time, the sagacious had shaken their heads and said, "Ministers could not last." True, that certain changes in policy, a year or two before, had divided the party on which the government depended, and strengthened that which opposed it. But still the more important members of that Government had been so long identified with official station, and there seemed so little power in the Opposition to form a cabinet of names familiar to official ears, that the general public had anticipated, at most, a few partial changes. Rumour now went far beyond this. Randal, whose whole prospects at present were but reflections from the greatness of his patron, was alarmed. He sought Egerton, but the minister was impenetrable, and seemed calm, confident, and imperturbed. Somewhat relieved, Randal then set himself to work to find a safe home for Riccabocca; for the greater need to succeed in obtaining fortune there, if he failed in getting it through Egerton. He found a quiet house, detached and secluded, in the neighbourhood of Norwood. No vicinity more secure from espionage and remark. He wrote to Riccabocca, and communicated the address, adding fresh assurances of his own power to be of use. The next morning he was seated in his office, thinking very little of the details, that he mastered, however, with mechanical precision, when the minister who presided over that department of the public service sent for him into his private room, and begged him to take a letter to Egerton, with whom he wished to consult relative to a very important point to be decided in the Cabinet that day. "I want you to take it," said the minister smiling (the minister was a frank homely man), "because you are in Mr Egerton's confidence, and he may give you some verbal message besides a written reply. Egerton is often *over* cautious and brief in the *litera scripta*."

Randal went first to Egerton's neighbouring office—Egerton had not been there that day. He then took a cabriolet and drove to Grosvenor Square. A quiet-looking chariot was at the door. Mr Egerton was at home; but the servant said, "Dr F. is with him, sir; and perhaps he may not like to be disturbed."

"What—is your master ill?"

"Not that I know of, sir. He never says he is ill. But he has looked poorly the last day or two."

Randal hesitated a moment; but his commission might be important, and Egerton was a man who so held the maxim, that health and all else must give way to business, that he resolved to enter; and, unannounced and unceremoniously as was his wont, he opened the door of the library. He started as he did so. Audley Egerton was leaning back on the sofa, and the doctor, on his knees before him, was applying the stethoscope to his breast. Egerton's eyes were partially closed as the door opened. But at the noise he sprang up, nearly oversetting the doctor. "Who's that?—How dare you!" he exclaimed, in a voice of great anger. Then recognising Randal, he changed colour, bit his lip, and muttered drily, "I beg pardon for my abruptness; what do you want, Mr Leslie?"

"This letter from Lord ——; I was told to deliver it immediately into your own hands. I beg pardon——"

"There is no cause," said Egerton, coldly. "I have had a slight attack of bronchitis; and as Parliament meets so soon, I must take advice from my doctor, if I would be heard by the reporters. Lay the letter on the table, and be kind enough to wait for my reply."

Randal withdrew. He had never seen a physician in that house before, and it seemed surprising that Egerton should even take a medical opinion upon a slight attack. While waiting in the ante-room there was a knock at the street door, and presently a gentleman, exceedingly well dressed, was shown in, and honoured Randal with an easy and half-familiar bow. Randal remembered to have met this personage at dinner, and at the house of a young nobleman of high fashion, but had not been introduced to him, and did not even know him by name. The visitor was better informed.

"Our friend Egerton is busy, I hear, Mr Leslie," said he, arranging the camelia in his button-hole.

"Our friend Egerton!" It must be a very great man to say, "Our friend Egerton."

"He will not be engaged long, I dare say," returned Randal, glancing his shrewd inquiring eye over the stranger's person.

"I trust not; my time is almost as precious as his own. I was not so fortunate as to be presented to you when we met at Lord Spendquick's. Good fellow, Spendquick; and decidedly clever."

Lord Spendquick was usually esteemed a gentleman without three ideas.

Randal smiled.

In the mean while the visitor had taken out a card from an embossed morocco case, and now presented it to Randal, who read thereon, "Baron Levy, No. —, Bruton St."

The name was not unknown to Randal. It was a name too often on the lips of men of fashion not to have reached the ears of an *habitué* of good society.

Mr Levy had been a solicitor by profession. He had of late years relinquished his ostensible calling; and not long since, in consequence of some services towards the negotiation of a loan, had been created a baron by one of the German kings. The wealth of Mr Levy was said to be only equalled by his good nature to all who were in want of a temporary loan, and with sound expectations of repaying it some day or other.

You seldom saw a finer-looking man than Baron Levy—about the same age as Egerton, but looking younger: so well preserved—such magnificent black whiskers—such superb teeth! Despite his name and his dark complexion, he did not, however, resemble a Jew—at least externally; and, in fact, he was not a Jew on the father's side, but the natural son of a rich English *grand seigneur*, by a Hebrew lady of distinction—in the opera. After his birth, this lady had married a German trader of her own persuasion, and her husband had been prevailed upon, for the convenience of all parties, to adopt his wife's son, and accord to him his own Hebrew name. Mr Levy, senior, was soon left a widower, and then the real father, though never actually owning the boy, had shown him great attention—had him frequently at his house—initiated him betimes into his own high-born society, for which the boy showed great taste. But when my Lord died, and left but a moderate legacy to the younger Levy, who was then about eighteen, that ambiguous person was articled to an attorney by his putative sire, who shortly afterwards returned to his native land, and was buried at Prague, where his tombstone may yet be seen. Young Levy, however, contrived to do very well without him. His real birth was generally known, and rather advantageous to him in a social point of view. His legacy enabled him to become a partner where he had been a clerk, and his practice became great amongst the fashionable classes of society. Indeed he was so useful, so pleasant, so much a man of the world, that he grew intimate with his clients—chiefly young men of rank; was on good terms with both Jew and Christian; and being neither one nor the other, resembled (to use Sheridan's incomparable simile) the blank page between the Old and the New Testament.

Vulgar, some might call Mr Levy, from his assurance, but it was not the vulgarity of a man accustomed to low and coarse society—rather the *mauvais ton* of a person not sure of his own position, but who has resolved to swagger into the best one he can get. When it is remembered that he had made his way in the world, and gleaned together an immense fortune, it is needless to add that he was as sharp as a needle, and as hard as a flint. No man had had more friends, and no man had stuck by them more firmly—so long as there was a pound in their pockets!

Something of this character had Randal heard of the Baron, and he now gazed, first at his card, and then at him, with—admiration.

"I met a friend of yours at Borrowell's the other day," resumed the Baron—"Young Hazeldean. Careful fellow—quite a man of the world."

As this was the last praise poor Frank deserved, Randal again smiled.

The Baron went on—"I hear, Mr Leslie, that you have much influence over this same Hazeldean. His affairs are in a sad state. I should be very happy to be of use to him, as a relation of my friend Egerton's; but he understands business so well that he despises my advice."

"I am sure you do him injustice."

"Injustice! I honour his caution. I say to every man, 'Don't come to me—I can get you money on much easier terms than any one else; and what's the result! You come so often that you ruin yourself; whereas a regular usurer without conscience frightens you. 'Cent per cent,' you say; 'oh, I must pull in.' If you have influence over your friend, tell him to stick to his bill-brokers, and have nothing to do with Baron Levy."

Here the minister's bell rung, and Randal, looking through the window, saw Dr F. walking to his carriage, which had made way for Baron Levy's splendid cabriolet—a cabriolet in the most perfect taste—Baron's coronet on the dark-brown panels—horse black, with such action!—harness just relieved with plating. The servant now entered, and requested Randal to step in; and, addressing the Baron, assured him that he would not be detained a minute.

"Leslie," said the minister, sealing a note, "take this back to Lord ——, and say that I shall be with him in an hour."

"No other message—he seemed to expect one."

"I daresay he did. Well, my letter is official, my message is not; beg him to see Mr —— before we meet—he will understand—all rests upon that interview."

Egerton then, extending the letter, resumed gravely—"Of course you will not mention to any one that Dr F. was with me: the health of public men is not to be suspected. Hum—were you in your own room or the ante-room?"

"The ante-room, sir."

Egerton's brow contracted slightly. "And Mr Levy was there, eh?"

"Yes—the Baron."

"Baron! true. Come to plague me about the Mexican loan, I suppose. I will keep you no longer."

Randal, much meditating, left the house, and re-entered his hack-cab. The Baron was admitted to the statesman's presence.

CHAPTER XIV.

Egerton had thrown himself at full length on the sofa, a position exceedingly rare with him; and about his whole air and manner, as Levy entered, there was something singularly different from that stateliness of port common to the austere legislator. The very tone of his voice was different. It was as if the statesman—the man of business—had vanished; it was rather the man of fashion and the idler, who, nodding languidly to his visitor, said, "Levy, what money can I have for a year?"

"The estate will bear very little more. My dear fellow, that last election was the very devil. You cannot go on thus much longer."

"My dear fellow!" Baron Levy hailed Audley Egerton as "my dear fellow." And Audley Egerton, perhaps, saw nothing strange in the words, though his lip curled.

"I shall not want to go on thus much longer," answered Egerton, as the curl on his lip changed to a gloomy smile. "The estate must, meanwhile, bear £5000 more."

"A hard pull on it. You had really better sell."

"I cannot afford to sell at present. I cannot afford men to say, 'Audley Egerton is done up—his property is for sale.'"

"It is very sad when one thinks what a rich man you have been—and may be yet!"

"Be yet! How?"

Baron Levy glanced towards the thick mahogany doors—thick and impervious as should be the doors of statesmen. "Why, you know that, with three words from you, I could produce an effect upon the stocks of three nations, that might give us each a hundred thousand pounds. We would go shares."

"Levy," said Egerton, coldly, though a deep blush overspread his face, "you are a scoundrel; that is your look out. I interfere with no man's tastes and conscience. I don't intend to be a scoundrel myself. I have told you that long ago."

The usurer's brows darkened, but he dispelled the cloud with an easy laugh.

"Well," said he, "you are neither wise nor complimentary, but you shall have the money. But yet, would it not be better," added Levy, with emphasis, "to borrow it without interest, of your friend L'Estrange?"

Egerton started, as if stung.

"You mean to taunt me, sir!" he exclaimed, passionately. "I accept pecuniary favours from Lord L'Estrange!—I!"

"Tut, my dear Egerton, I dare say my Lord would not think so ill now of that act in your life which——"

"Hold!" exclaimed Egerton, writhing. "Hold!"

He stopped and paced the room, muttering in broken sentences, "To blush before this man! Chastisement, chastisement!"

Levy gazed on him with hard and sinister eyes. The minister turned abruptly.

"Look you, Levy," said he, with forced composure—"you hate me—why, I know not."

"Hate you! How have I shown hatred? Would you ever have lived in this palace, and ruled this country as one of the most influential of its ministers, but for my management—my whispers to the wealthy Miss Leslie? Come, but for me what would you have been—perhaps a beggar?"

"What shall I be now, if I live? And this fortune which my marriage brought to me—it has passed for the main part into your hands. Be patient, you will have it all ere long. But there is one man in the world who has loved me from a boy, and woe to you if ever he learn that he has a right to despise me!"

"Egerton, my good fellow," said Levy, with great composure, "you need not threaten me, for what interest can I possibly have in tale-telling to Lord L'Estrange? Again, dismiss from your mind the absurd thought that I hate you. True, you snub me in private, you cut me in public, you refuse to come to my dinners, you'll not ask me to your own; still there is no man I like better, nor would more willingly serve. When do you want the £5000?"

"Perhaps in one month, perhaps not for three or four. Let it be ready when required."

"Enough ; depend on it. Have you any other commands?"

"None."

"I will take my leave, then. By-the-by, what do you suppose the Hazeldean rental is worth—net?"

"I don't know, nor care. You have no designs upon *that* too?"

"Well, I like keeping up family connections. Mr Frank seems a liberal young gentleman."

Before Egerton could answer, the Baron had glided to the door, and, nodding pleasantly, vanished with that nod.

Egerton remained, standing on his solitary hearth. A drear, single man's room it was, from wall to wall, despite its fretted ceilings and official pomp of Bramah escritoires and red boxes. Drear and cheerless—no trace of woman's habitation—no vestige of intruding, happy children. There stood the austere man alone. And then, with a deep sigh, he muttered, "Thank Heaven, not for long—it will not last long."

Repeating those words, he mechanically locked up his papers, and pressed his hand to his heart for an instant, as if a spasm had shot through it.

"So—I must shun all emotion!" said he, shaking his head gently.

In five minutes more, Audley Egerton was in the streets, his mien erect, and his step firm as ever.

"That man is made of bronze," said a leader of the Opposition to a friend as they rode past the minister. "What would I not give for his nerves!"

BOOK IX.

INITIAL CHAPTER.

ON PUBLIC LIFE.

Now that I am fairly in the heart of my story, these preliminary chapters must shrink into comparatively small dimensions, and not encroach upon the space required by the various personages whose acquaintance I have picked up here and there, and who are now all crowding upon me like poor relations to whom one has unadvisedly given a general invitation, and who descend upon one simultaneously, about Christmas time. Where they are to be stowed, and what is to become of them all, Heaven knows; in the meanwhile, the reader will have already observed that the Caxton Family themselves are turned out of their own rooms, sent a-packing, in order to make way for the new-comers.

But to proceed.—Note the heading to the present Chapter, "on PUBLIC LIFE,"—a thesis pertinent to this portion of my narrative, and if somewhat trite in itself, the greater is the stimulus to suggest thereon some original hints for reflection.

Were you ever in public life, my dear reader? I don't mean, by that question, to ask whether you were ever Lord Chancellor, Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, or even a member of the House of Commons. An author hopes to find readers far beyond that very egregious but very limited segment of the Great Circle. Were you ever a busy man in your vestry, active in a municipal corporation, one of a committee for furthering the interests of an enlightened candidate for your native burgh, town, or shire?—in a word, did you ever resign your private comforts as men in order to share the public troubles of mankind? If ever you have so far departed from the Lucretian philosophy, just look back—was it life at all that you lived?—were you an individual distinct existence—a passenger in the railway?—or were you merely an indistinct portion of that common flame which heated the boiler and generated the steam that set off the monster train?—very hot, very active, very useful, no doubt; but all your identity fused in flame, and all your forces vanishing in gas.

And do you think the people in the railway carriages care for you?—do you think that the gentleman in the worsted wrapper is saying to his neighbour with the striped rug on his comfortable knees, "How grateful we ought to be for that fiery particle which is cracking and hissing under the boiler! It helps us on a fraction of an inch from Vauxhall to Putney!" Not a bit of it. Ten to one but he is saying—"Not sixteen miles an hour! What the deuce is the matter with the stoker?"

Look at our friend Audley Egerton. You have just had a glimpse of the real being that struggles under the huge copper;—you have heard the hollow sound of the rich man's coffers under the tap of Baron Levy's friendly knuckle—heard the strong man's heart give out its dull warning sound to the scientific ear of Dr F——. And away once more vanishes the separate existence, lost again in the flame that heats the boiler and the smoke that curls into air from the grimy furnace.

Look to it, O Public Man, whoever thou art, and whatsoever thy degree — see if thou canst not compound matters, so as to keep a little nook apart for thy private life; that is, for *thyself!* Let the great Popkins Question not absorb wholly the individual soul of thee, as Smith or Johnson. Don't so entirely consume thyself under that insatiable boiler, that when thy poor little monad rushes out from the sooty furnace, and arrives at the stars, thou mayest find no vocation for thee there, and feel as if thou hadst nothing to do amidst the still splendours of the Infinite. I don't deny to thee the uses of "Public Life;" I grant that it is much to have helped to carry that great Popkins Question; but Private Life, my friend, is the life of thy private soul; and there may be matters concerned with that which, on consideration, thou mayest allow, cannot be wholly mixed up with the great Popkins Question — and were not finally settled when thou didst exclaim—"I have not lived in vain—the Popkins Question is carried at last!" Oh, immortal soul, for one quarter of an hour *per diem* — de-Popkinise thine immortality!

CHAPTER II.

It had not been without much persuasion on the part of Jackeymo, that Riccabocca had consented to settle himself in the house which Randal had recommended to him. Not that the exile conceived any suspicion of the young man beyond that which he might have shared with Jackeymo—viz. that Randal's interest in the father was increased by a very natural and excusable admiration of the daughter. But the Italian had the pride common to misfortune—he did not like to be indebted to others, and he shrank from the pity of those to whom it was known that he had held a higher station in his own land. These scruples gave way to the strength of his affection for his daughter and his dread of his foe. Good men, however able and brave, who have suffered from the wicked, are apt to form exaggerated notions of the power that has prevailed against them. Jackeymo had conceived a superstitious terror of Peschiera; and Riccabocca, though by no means addicted to superstition, still had a certain creep of the flesh whenever he thought of his foe.

But Riccabocca—than whom no man was more physically brave, and no man in some respects more morally timid—feared the Count less as a foe than as a gallant. He remembered his kinsman's surpassing beauty—the power he had obtained over women. He knew him versed in every art that corrupts, and wholly void of the conscience that deters. And Riccabocca had unhappily nursed himself into so poor an estimate of the female character, that even the pure and lofty nature of Violante did not seem to him a sufficient safeguard against the craft and determination of a practised and remorseless intriguer. But of all the precautions he could take, none appeared more likely to conduce to safety, than his establishing a friendly communication with one who professed to be able to get at all the Count's plans and movements, and who could apprise Riccabocca at once should his retreat be discovered. "Forewarned is forearmed," said he to himself, in one of the proverbs common to all nations. However, as with his usual sagacity he came to reflect upon the alarming intelligence conveyed to him by Randal—viz. that the Count sought his daughter's hand, he divined that there was some strong personal interest under such ambition; and what could be that interest save the probability of Riccabocca's ultimate admission to the Imperial grace, and the Count's desire to assure himself of the heritage to an estate that he might be permitted to retain no more? Riccabocca was not indeed aware of the condition (not according to usual customs in Austria) on which the Count held the forfeited domains. He knew not that they had been granted merely on pleasure; but he was too well aware of Peschiera's nature to suppose that he would woo a bride without a dower, or be moved by remorse in any overture of reconciliation. He felt assured too—and this increased all his fears—that Peschiera would never venture to seek an interview with himself; all the Count's designs on Violante would be dark, secret, and clandestine. He was perplexed and tormented by the doubt, whether or not to express openly to Violante his apprehensions of the nature of the danger to be apprehended. He had told her vaguely that it was for her sake that he desired secresy and concealment. But that might mean anything: what danger to himself would not menace her? Yet to say more was so contrary to a man of his Italian notions and Machiavellian maxims! To say to a young girl, "There is a man come over to England on purpose to woo and win you. For Heaven's sake take care of him; he is diabolically handsome; he never fails where he sets his heart." — "*Cospetto!*" cried the Doctor, aloud, as these admonitions shaped themselves to speech in the camera-obscura of his brain; "such a warning would have undone a Cornelia while she was yet an innocent spinster." No, he resolved to say nothing to Violante of the Count's intention, only to keep guard, and make himself and Jackeymo all eyes and all ears.

The house Randal had selected pleased Riccabocca at first glance. It stood alone, upon a little eminence; its upper windows commanded the high-road. It had been a school, and was surrounded by high walls, which contained a garden and lawn sufficiently large for exercise.

The garden doors were thick, fortified by strong bolts, and had a little wicket lattice, shut and opened at pleasure, from which Jackeymo could inspect all visitors before he permitted them to enter.

An old female servant from the neighbourhood was cautiously hired; Riccabocca renounced his Italian name, and abjured his origin. He spoke English sufficiently well to think he could pass as an Englishman. He called himself Mr Richmouth (a liberal translation of Riccabocca). He bought a blunderbuss, two pairs of pistols, and a huge house-dog. Thus provided for, he allowed Jackeymo to write a line to Randal and communicate his arrival.

Randal lost no time in calling. With his usual adaptability, and his powers of dissimulation, he contrived easily to please Mrs Riccabocca, and to increase the good opinion the exile was disposed to form of him. He engaged Violante in conversation on Italy and its poets. He promised to bring her books. He began, though more distantly than he could have desired—for her sweet stateliness awed him—the preliminaries of courtship. He established himself at once as a familiar guest, riding down daily in the dusk of evening, after the toils of office and retiring at night. In four or five days he thought he had made great progress with all. Riccabocca watched him narrowly, and grew absorbed in thought after every visit. At length one night, when he and Mrs Riccabocca were alone in the drawing-room, Violante having retired to rest, he thus spoke as he filled his pipe :—

"Happy is the man who has no children! Thrice happy he who has no girls!"

"My dear Alphonso!" said the wife, looking up from the wristband to which she was attaching a neat mother-o'-pearl button. She said no more; it was the sharpest rebuke she was in the custom of administering to her husband's cynical and odious observations. Riccabocca lighted his pipe with a thread-paper, gave three great puffs, and resumed,—

"One blunderbuss, four pistols, and a house-dog called Pompey, who would have made mincemeat of Julius Cæsar!"

"He certainly eats a great deal, does Pompey!" said Mrs Riccabocca, simply. "But if he relieves your mind!"

"He does not relieve it in the least, ma'am," groaned Riccabocca; "and that is the point I was coming to. This is a most harassing life, and a most undignified life. And I who have only asked from Heaven dignity and repose! But, if Violante were once married, I should want neither blunderbuss, pistol, nor Pompey. And it is that which would relieve my mind, *cara mia*,—Pompey only relieves my larder!"

Now Riccabocca had been more communicative to Jemima than he had been to Violante. Having once trusted her with one secret, he had every motive to trust her with another; and he had accordingly spoken out his fears of the Count di Peschiera. Therefore she answered, laying down the work, and taking her husband's hand tenderly,—

"Indeed, my love, since you dread so much (though I own that I must think unreasonably) this wicked, dangerous man, it would be the happiest thing in the world to see dear Violante well married; because, you see, if she is married to one person she cannot be married to another; and all fear of this Count, as you say, would be at an end."

"You cannot express yourself better. It is a great comfort to unbosom one's self to a wife, after all!" quoth Riccabocca.

"But," said the wife, after a grateful kiss—"but, where and how can we find a husband suitable to the rank of your daughter?"

"There—there—there," cried Riccabocca, pushing back his chair to the farther end of the room—"that comes of unbosoming one's self! Out flies one's secret; it is opening the lid of Pandora's box; one is betrayed, ruined, undone!"

"Why, there's not a soul that can hear us!" said Mrs Riccabocca, soothingly.

"That's chance, ma'am! If you once contract the habit of blabbing out a secret when nobody's by, how on earth can you resist it when you have the pleasurable excitement of telling it to all the world? Vanity, vanity—woman's vanity! Woman never could withstand rank—never!" The Doctor went on railing for a quarter of an hour, and was very reluctantly appeased by Mrs Riccabocca's repeated and tearful assurances that she would never even whisper to herself that her husband had ever held any other rank than that of

Doctor. Riccabocca, with a dubious shake of the head, renewed—

"I have done with all pomp and pretension. Besides, the young man is a born gentleman; he seems in good circumstances; he has energy and latent ambition; he is akin to L'Estrange's intimate friend: he seems attached to Violante. I don't think it probable that we could do better. Nay, if Peschiera fears that I shall be restored to my country, and I learn the wherefore, and the ground to take, through this young man—why, gratitude is the first virtue of the noble!"

"You speak, then, of Mr Leslie?"

"To be sure—of whom else?"

Mrs Riccabocca leaned her cheek on her hand thoughtfully. "Now you have told me *that*, I will observe him with different eyes."

"*Anima mia*, I don't see how the difference of your eyes will alter the object they look upon!" grumbled Riccabocca, shaking the ashes out of his pipe.

"The object alters when we see it in a different point of view!" replied Jemima, modestly. "This thread does very well when I look at it in order to sew on a button, but I should say it would never do to tie up Pompey in his kennel."

"Reasoning by illustration, upon my soul!" ejaculated Riccabocca, amazed.

"And," continued Jemima, "when I am to regard one who is to constitute the happiness of that dear child, and for life, can I regard him as I would the pleasant guest of an evening? Ah, trust me, Alphonso;

I don't pretend to be wise like you; but, when a woman considers what a man is likely to prove to woman—his sincerity—his honour—his heart—oh, trust me, she is wiser than the wisest man!"

Riccabocca continued to gaze on Jemima with unaffected admiration and surprise. And, certainly, to use his phrase, since he had unbosomed himself to his better half—since he had confided in her, consulted with her—her sense had seemed to quicken, her whole mind to expand.

"My dear," said the sage, "I vow and declare that Machiavelli was a fool to you. And I have been as dull as the chair I sit upon, to deny myself so many years the comfort and counsel of such a——but, *corpo di Bacco!* forget all about rank; and so now to bed.—One must not holloa till one's out of the wood," muttered the ungrateful suspicious villain, as he lighted the chamber candle.

CHAPTER III.

Riccabocca could not confine himself to the precincts within the walls to which he condemned Violante. Resuming his spectacles, and wrapped in his cloak, he occasionally sallied forth upon a kind of outwatch or reconnoitring expedition,—restricting himself, however, to the immediate neighbourhood, and never going quite out of sight of his house. His favourite walk was to the summit of a hillock overgrown with stunted brushwood. Here he would sit himself musingly, often till the hoofs of Randal's horse rang on the winding road, as the sun set over fading herbage, red and vaprous, in autumnal skies. Just below the hillock, and not two hundred yards from his own house, was the only other habitation in view—a charming, thoroughly English cottage, though somewhat imitated from the Swiss,—with gable ends, thatched roof, and pretty projecting casements, opening through creepers and climbing roses. From his height he commanded the gardens of this cottage, and his eye of artist was pleased, from the first sight, with the beauty which some exquisite taste had given to the ground. Even in that cheerless season of the year, the garden wore a summer smile; the evergreens were so bright and various, and the few flowers still left, so hardy and so healthful. Facing the south, a colonnade, or covered gallery, of rustic woodwork had been formed, and creeping plants, lately set, were already beginning to clothe its columns. Opposite to this colonnade there was a fountain, which reminded Riccabocca of his own at the deserted Casino. It was indeed singularly like it; the same circular shape, the same girdle of flowers around it. But the jet from it varied every day—fantastic and multiform, like the sports of a Naïad,—sometimes shooting up like a tree, sometimes shaped as a convolvulus, sometimes tossing from its silver spray a flower of vermilion, or a fruit of gold, as if at play with its toy, like a happy child. And near the fountain was a large aviary, large enough to enclose a tree. The Italian could just catch a gleam of rich colour from the wings of the birds, as they glanced to and fro within the network, and could hear their songs, contrasting the silence of the freer populace of air, whom the coming winter had already stilled.

Riccabocca's eye, so alive to all aspects of beauty, luxuriated in the view of this garden. Its pleasantness had a charm that stole him from his anxious fear and melancholy memories.

He never saw but two forms within the demesnes, and he could not distinguish their features. One was a woman, who seemed to him of staid manner and homely appearance: she was seen but rarely. The other a man, often pacing to and fro the colonnade, with frequent pauses before the playful fountain, or the birds that sang louder as he approached. This latter form would then disappear within a room, the glass door of which was at the extreme end of the colonnade ; and if the door were left open, Riccabocca could catch a glimpse of the figure bending over a table covered with books.

Always, however, before the sun set, the man would step forth more briskly, and occupy himself with the garden, often working at it with good heart, as if at a task of delight ; and then, too, the woman would come out, and stand by, as if talking to her companion. Riccabocca's curiosity grew aroused. He bade Jemima inquire of the old maid-servant who lived at the cottage, and heard that its owner was a Mr Oran—a quiet gentleman, and fond of his book.

While Riccabocca thus amused himself, Randal had not been prevented, either by his official cares or his schemes on Violante's heart and fortune, from furthering the project that was to unite Frank Hazeldean and Beatrice di Negra. Indeed, as to the first, a ray of hope was sufficient to fire the ardent and unsuspecting lover. And Randal's artful misrepresentation of his conference with Mrs Hazeldean removed all fear of parental displeasure from a mind always too disposed to give itself up to the temptation of the moment. Beatrice, though her feelings for Frank were not those of love, became more and more influenced by Randal's arguments and representations, the more especially as her brother grew morose, and even menacing, as days slipped on, and she could give no clue to the retreat of those whom he sought for. Her debts, too, were really urgent. As Randal's profound knowledge of human infirmity had shrewdly conjectured, the scruples of honour and pride, that had made her declare she would not bring to a husband her own encumbrances, began to yield to the pressure of necessity. She listened already, with but faint objections, when Randal urged her not to wait for the uncertain discovery that was to secure her dowry, but by a private marriage with Frank escape at once into freedom and security. While, though he had first held out to young Hazeldean the inducement of Beatrice's dowry as a reason of self-justification in the eyes of the Squire, it was still easier to drop that inducement, which had always rather damped than fired the high spirit and generous heart of the poor Guardsman. And Randal could conscientiously say, that when he had asked the Squire if he expected fortune with Frank's bride, the Squire had replied,—"I don't care." Thus encouraged by his friend and his own heart, and the softening manner of a woman who might have charmed many a colder, and fooled many a wiser man, Frank rapidly yielded to the snares held out for his perdition. And though, as yet, he honestly shrank from proposing to Beatrice or himself a marriage without the consent, and even the knowledge, of his parents, yet Randal was quite content to leave a nature, however good, so thoroughly impulsive and undisciplined, to the influence of the first strong passion it had ever known. Meanwhile, it was so easy to dissuade Frank from even giving a hint to the folks at home. "For," said the wily and able traitor, "though we may be sure of Mrs Hazeldean's consent, and her power over your father, when the step is once taken, yet we cannot count for certain on the Squire, he is so choleric and hasty. He might hurry to town, see Madame di Negra, blurt out some passionate, rude expressions which would wake her resentment, and cause her instant rejection; and it might be too late if he repented afterwards,—as he would be sure to do."

Meanwhile, Randal Leslie gave a dinner at the Clarendon Hotel (an extravagance most contrary to his habits), and invited Frank, Mr Borrowell, and Baron Levy.

But this house-spider, which glided with so much ease after its flies, through webs so numerous and mazy, had yet to amuse Madame di Negra with assurances that the fugitives sought for would sooner or later be discovered. Though Randal baffled and eluded her suspicion that he was already acquainted with the exiles ("the persons he had thought of were," he said, "quite different from her description;" and he even presented to her an old singing-master, and a sallow-faced daughter, as the Italians who had caused his mistake), it was necessary for Beatrice to prove the sincerity of the aid she had promised to her brother, and to introduce Randal to the Count. It was no less desirable to Randal to know, and even win, the confidence of this man—his rival.

The two met at Madame di Negra's house. There is something very strange, and almost mesmerical, in the *rapport* between two evil natures. Bring two honest men together, and it is ten to one if they recognise each other as honest; differences in temper, manner, even politics, may make each misjudge the other. But bring together two men, unprincipled and perverted—men who, if born in a cellar, would have been food for the hulks or gallows—and they understand each other by instant sympathy. The eyes of Franzini, Count of Peschiera, and Randal Leslie no sooner met, than a gleam of intelligence shot from both. They talked on indifferent subjects—weather, gossip, politics—what not. They bowed and they smiled; but, all the while, each was watching, plumbing the other's heart, each measuring his strength with his companion; each inly saying, "This is a very remarkable rascal; am I a match for him?" It was at dinner they met; and following the English fashion, Madame di Negra left them alone with their wine.

Then, for the first time, Count di Peschiera cautiously and adroitly made a covered push towards the object of the meeting.

"You have never been abroad, my dear sir? You must contrive to visit me at Vienna. I grant the splendour of your London world; but, honestly speaking, it wants the freedom of ours—a freedom which unites gaiety with polish. For as your society is mixed, there are pretension and effort with those who have no right to be in it, and artificial condescension and chilling arrogance with those who have to keep their inferiors at a certain distance. With us, all being of fixed rank and acknowledged birth, familiarity is at once established. Hence," added the Count, with his French lively smile—"hence there is no place like Vienna for a young man—no place like Vienna for *bonnes fortunes*."

"Those make the paradise of the idle," replied Randal, "but the purgatory of the busy. I confess frankly to you, my dear Count, that I have as little of the leisure which becomes the aspirer to *bonnes fortunes* as I have the personal graces which obtain them without an effort;" and he inclined his head as in compliment.

"So," thought the Count, "woman is not his weak side. What is?"

"*Morbleu!* my dear Mr Leslie—had I thought as you do some years since, I had saved myself from many a trouble. After all, Ambition is the best mistress to woo; for with her there is always the hope, and never the possession."

"Ambition, Count," replied Randal, still guarding himself in dry sententiousness, "is the luxury of the rich, and the necessity of the poor."

"Aha," thought the Count, "it comes, as I anticipated from the first—comes to the bribe." He passed the wine to Randal, filling his own glass, and draining it carelessly; "*Sur mon âme, mon cher*," said the Count, "luxury is ever pleasanter than necessity; and I am resolved at least to give ambition a trial—*je vais me* *réfugier dans le sein du bonheur domestique*—a married life and a settled home. *Peste!* If it were not for ambition one would die of ennui. Apropos, my dear sir, I have to thank you for promising my sister your aid in finding a near and dear kinsman of mine, who has taken refuge in your country, and hides himself even from me."

"I should be most happy to assist in your search. As yet, however, I have only to regret that all my good wishes are fruitless. I should have thought, however, that a man of such rank had been easily found, even through the medium of your own ambassador."

"Our own ambassador is no very warm friend of mine; and the rank would be no clue, for it is clear that my kinsman has never assumed it since he quitted his country."

"He quitted it, I understand, not exactly from choice," said Randal, smiling. "Pardon my freedom and curiosity, but will you explain to me a little more than I learn from English rumour (which never accurately reports upon foreign matters still more notorious), how a person who had so much to lose, and so little to win, by revolution, could put himself into the same crazy boat with a crew of hare-brained adventurers and visionary professors?"

"Professors!" repeated the Count; "I think you have hit on the very answer to your question; not but what men of high birth were as mad as the *canaille*. I am the more willing to gratify your curiosity, since it will perhaps serve to guide your kind search in my favour. You must know, then, that my kinsman was not born the heir to the rank he obtained. He was but a distant relation to the head of the house which he afterwards represented. Brought up in an Italian university, he was distinguished for his learning and his eccentricities. There, too, I suppose, brooding over old wives' tales about freedom, and so forth, he contracted his *carbonaro*, chimerical notions for the independence of Italy. Suddenly, by three deaths, he was elevated, while yet young, to a station and honours which might have satisfied any man in his senses. *Que diable!* what could the independence of Italy do for *him!* He and I were cousins; we had played together as boys; but our lives had been separated till his succession to rank brought us necessarily together. We became exceedingly intimate. And you may judge how I loved him," said the Count, averting his eyes slightly from Randal's quiet, watchful gaze, "when I add, that I forgave him for enjoying a heritage that, but far him, had been mine."

"Ah, you were next heir?"

"And it is a hard trial to be very near a great fortune, and yet just to miss it."

"True," cried Randal, almost impetuously. The Count now raised his eyes, and again the two men looked into each other's souls.

"Harder still, perhaps," resumed the Count, after a short pause—"harder still might it have been to some men to forgive the rival as well as the heir."

"Rival! how?"

"A lady who had been destined by her parents to myself, though we had never, I own, been formally betrothed, became the wife of my kinsman."

"Did he know of your pretensions?"

"I do him the justice to say he did not. He saw and fell in love with the young lady I speak of. Her parents were dazzled. Her father sent for me. He apologised—he explained; he set before me, mildly enough, certain youthful imprudences or errors of my own, as an excuse for his change of mind; and he asked me not only to resign all hope of his daughter, but to conceal from her new suitor that I had ever ventured to hope."

"And you consented?"

"I consented."

"That was generous. You must, indeed, have been much attached to your kinsman. As a lover, I cannot comprehend it; perhaps, my dear Count, you may enable me to understand it better—as a man of the world."

"Well," said the Count, with his most *roué* air, "I suppose we *are* both men of the world."

"*Both!* certainly," replied Randal, just in the tone which Peachum might have used in courting the confidence of Lockit.

"As a man of the world, then, I own," said the Count, playing with the rings on his fingers, "that if I could not marry the lady myself (and that seemed to me clear), it was very natural that I should wish to see her married to my wealthy kinsman."

"Very natural; it might bring your wealthy kinsman and yourself still closer together."

"This is really a very clever fellow!" thought the Count, but he made no direct reply.

"*Enfin*, to cut short a long story, my cousin afterwards got entangled in attempts, the failure of which is historically known. His projects were detected—himself denounced. He fled, and the Emperor, in sequestrating his estates, was pleased, with rare and singular clemency, to permit me, as his nearest kinsman, to enjoy the revenues of half those estates during the royal pleasure; nor was the other half formally confiscated. It was, no doubt, his Majesty's desire not to extinguish a great Italian name; and if my cousin and his child died in exile, why, of that name, I, a loyal subject of Austria—I, Franzini, Count di Peschiera, would become the representative. Such, in a similar case, has been sometimes the Russian policy towards Polish insurgents."

"I comprehend perfectly; and I can also conceive that you, in profiting so largely, though so justly, by the fall of your kinsman, may have been exposed to much unpopularity—even to painful suspicion."

"*Entre nous, mon cher*, I care not a stiver for popularity; and as to suspicion, who is he that can escape from the calumny of the envious? But, unquestionably, it would be most desirable to unite the divided members of our house; and this union I can now effect, by the consent of the Emperor to my marriage with my kinsman's daughter. You see, therefore, why I have so great an interest in this research?"

"By the marriage-articles you could, no doubt, secure the retention of the half you hold; and if you survive your kinsman, you would enjoy the whole. A most desirable marriage; and, if made, I suppose that would suffice to obtain your cousin's amnesty and grace?"

"You say it."

"But even without such marriage, since the Emperor's clemency has been extended to so many of the proscribed, it is, perhaps, probable that your cousin might be restored?"

"It once seemed to me possible," said the Count, reluctantly; "but since I have been in England, I think not. The recent revolution in France, the democratic spirit rising in Europe, tend to throw back the cause of a proscribed rebel. England swarms with revolutionists; my cousin's residence in this country is in itself suspicious. The suspicion is increased by his strange seclusion. There are many Italians here who would aver that they had met with him, and that he was still engaged in revolutionary projects."

"Aver—untruly?"

"*Ma foi*—it comes to the same thing; *les absens ont toujours tort.* I speak to a man of the world. No; without some such guarantee for his faith as his daughter's marriage with myself would give, his recall is improbable. By the heaven above us, it shall be *impossible!*" The Count rose as he said this—rose as if the mask of simulation had fairly fallen from the visage of crime—rose tall and towering, a very image of masculine power and strength, beside the slight, bended form and sickly face of the intellectual schemer. And had you seen them thus confronted and contrasted, you would have felt that if ever the time should come when the interest of the one would compel him openly to denounce or boldly to expose the other, the odds were that the brilliant and audacious reprobate would master the weaker nerve but superior wit of the furtive traitor. Randal was startled ; but rising also, he said, carelessly,—

"What if this guarantee can no longer be given?—what if, in despair of return, and in resignation to his altered fortunes, your cousin has already married his daughter to some English suitor?"

"Ah, that would indeed be, next to my own marriage with her, the most fortunate thing that could happen to myself."

"How? I don't understand!"

"Why, if my cousin has so abjured his birthright, and forsworn his rank—if this heritage, which is so dangerous from its grandeur, pass, in case of his pardon, to some obscure Englishman—a foreigner—a native of a country that has no ties with ours—a country that is the very refuge of levellers and Carbonari—*mort de ma vie!* do you think that such would not annihilate all chance of my cousin's restoration, and be an excuse even in the eyes of Italy for formally conferring the sequestrated estates on an Italian? No ; unless, indeed, the girl were to marry an Englishman of such name and birth and connection as would in themselves be a guarantee (and how in poverty is this likely ?), I should go back to Vienna with a light heart, if I could say, 'My kinswoman is an Englishman's wife—shall her children be the heirs to a house so renowned for its lineage, and so formidable for its wealth ?' *Parbleu !* if my cousin were but an adventurer, or merely a professor, he had been pardoned long ago. The great enjoy the honour not to be pardoned easily."

Randal fell into deep but brief thought. The Count observed him, not face to face, but by the reflection of an opposite mirror. "This man knows something; this man is deliberating; this man can help me," thought the Count.

But Randal said nothing to confirm these hypotheses. Recovering from his abstraction, he expressed courteously his satisfaction at the Count's prospects, either way. "And since, after all," he added, "you mean so well to your cousin, it occurs to me that you might discover him by a very simple English process."

"How ?"

"Advertise that, if he will come to some place appointed, he will hear of something to his advantage."

The Count shook his head. "He would suspect me, and not come."

"But he was intimate with you. He joined an insurrection;—you were more prudent. You did not injure him, though you may have benefited yourself. Why should he shun you ?"

"The conspirators forgive none who do not con-spire; besides, to speak frankly, he thought I injured him."

"Could you not conciliate him through his wife—whom—you resigned to him?"

"She is dead—died before he left the country."

"Oh, that is unlucky! Still I think an advertisement might do good. Allow me to reflect on that subject. Shall we now join *Madame la Marquise?*"

On re-entering the drawing-room, the gentlemen found Beatrice in full dress, seated by the fire, and reading so intently that she did not remark them enter.

"What so interests you, *ma sœur?*—the last novel by Balzac, no doubt?"

Beatrice started, and, looking up, showed eyes that were full of tears. "Oh no! no picture of miserable, vicious, Parisian life. This is beautiful; there is *soul* here."

Randal took up the book which the Marchesa laid down; it was the same which had charmed the circle at Hazeldean—charmed the innocent and fresh-hearted—charmed now the wearied and tempted votaress of the world.

"Hum," murmured Randal; "the Parson was right. This is power—a sort of a power."

"How I should like to know the author! Who can he be—can you guess?"

"Not I. Some old pedant in spectacles."

"I think not—I am sure not.—Here beats a heart I have ever sighed to find, and never found."

"Oh, *la naïve enfant!*" cried the Count; "*comme son imagination s'égare en rêves enchantés.* And to think that, while you talk like an Arcadian, you are dressed like a princess."

"Ah, I forgot—the Austrian ambassador's. I shall not go to-night. This book unfits me for the artificial world."

"Just as you will, my sister. I shall go. I dislike the man, and he me; but ceremonies before men!"

"You are going to the Austrian Embassy?" said Randal: "I, too, shall be there. We shall meet." And he took his leave.

"I like your young friend prodigiously," said the Count, yawning. "I am sure that he knows of the lost birds, and will stand to them like a pointer, if I can but make it his interest to do so. We shall see."

CHAPTER IV.

Randal arrived at the ambassador's before the Count, and contrived to mix with the young noblemen attached to the embassy, and to whom he was known. Standing among these was a young Austrian, on his travels, of very high birth, and with an air of noble grace that suited the ideal of the old German chivalry. Randal was presented to him, and, after some talk on general topics, observed, "By the way, Prince, there is now in London a countryman of yours, with whom you are, doubtless, familiarly acquainted—the Count di Peschiera."

"He is no countryman of mine. He is an Italian. I know him but by sight and by name," said the Prince, stiffly.

"He is of very ancient birth, I believe."

"Unquestionably. His ancestors were gentlemen."

"And very rich."

"Indeed! I have understood the contrary. He enjoys, it is true, a large revenue."

A young *attaché*, less discreet than the Prince, here observed, "Oh, Peschiera!—Poor fellow, he is too fond of play to be rich."

"And there is some chance that the kinsman whose revenue he holds may obtain his pardon, and re-enter into possession of his fortunes—so I hear, at least," said Randal, artfully.

"I shall be glad if it be true," said the Prince, with decision; "and I speak the common sentiment at Vienna. That kinsman had a noble spirit, and was, I believe, equally duped and betrayed. Pardon me, sir; but we Austrians are not so bad as we are painted. Have you ever met in England the kinsman you speak of?"

"Never, though he is supposed to reside here; and the Count tells me that he has a daughter."

"The Count—ha! I heard something of a scheme —a wager of that—that Count's;—a daughter! Poor girl! I hope she will escape his pursuit; for, no doubt, he pursues her."

"Possibly she may already have married an Englishman."

"I trust not," said the Prince, seriously; "that might at present be a serious obstacle to her father's return."

"You think so?"

"There can be no doubt of it," interposed the *attaché*, with a grand and positive air; unless, indeed, the Englishman were of a rank equal to her own."

Here there was a slight well-bred murmur and buzz at the door; for the Count di Peschiera himself was announced; and as he entered, his presence was so striking, and his beauty so dazzling, that whatever there might be to the prejudice of his character, it seemed instantly effaced or forgotten in that irresistible admiration which it is the prerogative of personal attributes alone to create.

The Prince, with a slight curve of his lip at the groups that collected round the Count, turned to Randal, and said, " Can you tell me if a distinguished countryman of yours is in England—Lord L'Estrange ? "

" No, Prince—he is not. You know him ? "

" Well."

" He is acquainted with the Count's kinsman ; and perhaps from him you have learned to think so highly of that kinsman ? "

The Prince bowed, and answered as he moved away, " When one man of high honour vouches for another, he commands the belief of all."

" Certainly," soliloquised Randal, " I must not be precipitate. I was very near falling into a terrible trap. If I were to marry the girl, and only, by so doing, settle away her inheritance on Peschiera !—How hard it is to be sufficiently cautious in this world ! "

While thus meditating, a member of Parliament tapped him on the shoulder.

" Melancholy, Leslie ! I lay a wager I guess your thoughts."

" Guess," answered Randal.

" You were thinking of the place you are so soon to lose."

" Soon to lose ! "

"Why, if ministers go out, you could hardly keep it, I suppose."

This ominous and horrid member of Parliament, Squire Hazeldean's favourite county member, Sir John, was one of those legislators especially odious to officials—an independent "large-acred" member, who would no more take office himself than he would cut down the oaks in his park, and who had no bowels of human feeling for those who had opposite tastes and less magnificent means.

"Hem!" said Randal, rather surlily. "In the first place, Sir John, ministers are not going out."

"Oh, yes, they will go. You know I vote with them generally, and would willingly keep them in; but they are men of honour and spirit; and if they can't carry their measures, they must resign; otherwise, by Jove, I would turn round and vote them out myself!"

"I have no doubt you would, Sir John; you are quite capable of it; that rests with you and your constituents. But even if ministers did go out, I am but a poor subaltern in a public office. I am no minister—why should I go out too?"

"Why? Hang it, Leslie, you are laughing at me. A young fellow like you could never be mean enough to stay in, under the very men who drove out your friend Egerton!"

"It is not usual for those in the public offices to retire with every change of Government."

"Certainly not; but always those who are the relations of a retiring minister—always those who have been regarded as politicians, and who mean to enter Parliament, as of course you will do at the next election. But you know that as well as I do—you who are so decided a politician—the writer of that admirable pamphlet! I should not like to tell my friend Hazeldean, who has a sincere interest in you, that you ever doubted on a question of honour as plain as your A, B, C."

"Indeed, Sir John," said Randal, recovering his suavity, while he inly breathed a dire anathema on his county member, "I am so new to these things, that what you say never struck me before. No doubt you must be right; at all events, I cannot have a better guide and adviser than Mr Egerton himself."

Sir John.—"No, certainly—perfect gentleman, Egerton! I wish we could make it up with him and Hazeldean."

Randal (sighing).—"Ah, I wish we could!"

Sir John.—"And some chance of it now; for the time is coming when all true men of the old school must stick together."

Randal.—"Wisely, admirably said, my dear Sir John. But, pardon me, I must pay my respects to the ambassador."

Randal escaped, and passing on, saw the ambassador himself in the next room, conferring in a corner with Audley Egerton. The ambassador seemed very grave —Egerton calm and impenetrable, as usual. Presently the Count passed by, and the ambassador bowed to him very stiffly.

As Randal, some time later, was searching for his cloak below, Audley Egerton unexpectedly joined him.

"Ah, Leslie," said the minister, with more kindness than usual, "if you don't think the night air too cold for you, let us walk home together. I have sent away the carriage."

This condescension in his patron was so singular, that it quite startled Randal, and gave him a presentiment of some evil. When they were in the street, Egerton, after a pause, began—

"My dear Mr Leslie, it was my hope and belief that I had provided for you at least a competence; and that I might open to you, later, a career yet more brilliant. Hush! I don't doubt your gratitude; let me proceed. There is a possible chance, after certain decisions that the Government have come to, that we may be beaten in the House of Commons, and of course resign. I tell you this beforehand, for I wish you to have time to consider what, in that case, would be your best course. My power of serving you may then probably be over. It would, no doubt (seeing our close connection, and my views with regard to your future being so well known)—no doubt, be expected that you should give up the place you hold, and follow my fortunes for good or ill. But as I have no personal enemies with the opposite party—and as I have sufficient position in the world to uphold and sanction your choice, whatever it may be, if you think it more prudent to retain your place, tell me so openly, and I think I can contrive that you may do it without loss of character and credit. In that case, confine your ambition merely to rising gradually in your office, without mixing in politics. If, on the other hand, you should prefer to take your chance of my return to office, and so resign your present place; and, furthermore, should commit yourself to a policy that may then be not only in opposition, but unpopular, I will do my best to introduce you into parliamentary life. I cannot say that I advise the latter."

Randal felt as a man feels after a severe fall—he was literally stunned. At length he faltered out—

"Can you think, sir, that I should ever desert your fortunes—your party—your cause?"

"My dear Leslie," replied the minister, "you are too young to have committed yourself to any men or to any party, except, indeed, in that unlucky pamphlet. This must not be an affair of sentiment, but of sense and reflection. Let us say no more on the point now; but by considering the *pros* and the *cons*, you can better judge what to do, should the time for option suddenly arrive."

"But I hope that time may not come."

"I hope so too, and most sincerely," said the minister, with deliberate and genuine emphasis.

"What could be so bad for the country?" ejaculated Randal. "It does not seem to me possible, in the nature of things, that you and your party should ever go out!"

"And when we are once out, there will be plenty of wiseacres to say it is out of the nature of things that we should ever come in again. Here we are at the door."

CHAPTER V.

Randal passed a sleepless night; but, indeed, he was one of those persons who neither need, nor are accustomed to, much sleep. However, towards morning, when dreams are said to be prophetic, he fell into a most delightful slumber—a slumber peopled by visions fitted to lure on, through labyrinths of law, predestined chancellors, or wreck upon the rocks of glory the inebriate souls of youthful ensigns—dreams from which Rood Hall emerged crowned with the towers of Belvoir or Raby, and looking over subject lands and manors wrested from the nefarious usurpation of Thornhills and Hazeldeans—dreams in which Audley Egerton's gold and power—rooms in Downing Street, and saloons in Grosvenor Square—had passed away to the smiling dreamer, as the empire of Chaldæa passed to Darius the Median. Why visions so belying the gloomy and anxious thoughts that preceded them should visit the pillow of Randal Leslie, surpasses my philosophy to conjecture. He yielded, however, passively to their spell, and was startled to hear the clock strike eleven as he descended the stairs to breakfast. He was vexed at the lateness of the hour, for he had meant to have taken advantage of the unwonted softness of Egerton, and drawn therefrom some promises or proffers to cheer the prospects which the minister had so chillingly expanded before him the preceding night: and it was only at breakfast that he usually found the opportunity of private conference with his busy patron. But Audley Egerton would be sure to have sallied forth—and so he had—only Randal was surprised to hear that he had gone out in his carriage, instead of on foot, as was his habit. Randal soon despatched his solitary meal, and with a new and sudden affection for his office, thitherwards bent his way. As he passed through Piccadilly, he heard behind a voice that had lately become familiar to him, and turning round, saw Baron Levy walking side by side, though not arm-in-arm, with a gentleman almost as smart as himself, but with a jauntier step and a brisker air—a step that, like Diomed's, as described by Shakespeare—

> "Rises on the toe;—that spirit of his
> In aspiration lifts him from the earth."

Indeed, one may judge of the spirits and disposition of a man by his ordinary gait and mien in walking. He who habitually pursues abstract thought looks down on the ground. He who is accustomed to sudden impulses, or is trying to seize upon some necessary recollection, looks up with a kind of jerk. He who is a steady, cautious, merely practical man, walks on deliberately, his eyes straight before him; and even in his most musing moods, observes things around sufficiently to avoid a porter's knot or a butcher's tray. But the man with strong ganglions—of pushing, lively temperament, who, though practical, is yet speculative—the man who is emulous and active, and ever trying to rise in life—sanguine, alert, bold—walks with a spring—looks rather above the heads of his fellow-passengers—but with a quick, easy turn of his own, which is lightly set on his shoulders; his mouth is a little open—his eye is bright, rather restless, but penetrative—his port has something of defiance—his form is erect, but without stiffness. Such was the appearance of the Baron's companion. And as Randal turned round at Levy's voice, the Baron said to his companion, "A young man in the first circles—you should book him for your fair lady's parties. How d'ye do, Mr Leslie? Let me introduce you to Mr Richard Avenel." Then, as he hooked his arm into Randal's, he whispered, "Man of first-rate talent—monstrous rich—has two or three parliamentary seats in his pocket—wife gives parties—her foible."

"Proud to make your acquaintance, sir," said Mr Avenel, lifting his hat. "Fine day."

"Rather cold too," said Leslie, who, like all thin persons with weak digestions, was chilly by temperament; besides, he had enough on his mind to chill his body.

"So much the healthier—braces the nerves," said Mr Avenel; "but you young fellows relax the system by hot rooms and late hours. Fond of dancing, of course, sir?" Then, without waiting for Randal's negative, Mr Richard continued rapidly, "Mrs Avenel has a *soirée dansante* on Thursday — shall be very happy to see you in Eaton Square. Stop, I have a card;" and he drew out a dozen large invitation-cards, from which he selected one, and presented it to Randal. The Baron pressed that young gentleman's arm, and Randal replied courteously that it would give him great pleasure to be introduced to Mrs Avenel. Then, as he was not desirous to be seen under the wing of Baron Levy, like a pigeon under that of a hawk, he gently extricated himself, and, pleading great haste, walked quickly on towards his office.

"That young man will make a figure some day," said the Baron. "I don't know any one of his age with so few prejudices. He is a connection by marriage to Audley Egerton, who——"

"Audley Egerton!" exclaimed Mr Avenel; "a d—d haughty, aristocratic, disagreeable, ungrateful fellow!"

"Why, what do you know of him?"

"He owed his first seat in Parliament to the votes of two near relations of mine, and when I called upon him some time ago, in his office, he absolutely ordered me out of the room. Hang his impertinence; if ever I can pay him off, I guess I shan't fail for want of good will!"

"Ordered you out of the room? That's not like Egerton, who is so civil, if formal—at least to most men. You must have offended him in his weak point."

"A man whom the public pays so handsomely should have no weak point. What is Egerton's?"

"Oh, he values himself on being a thorough gentleman—a man of the nicest honour," said Levy, with a sneer. "You must have ruffled his plumes there. How was it?"

"I forget," answered Mr Avenel, who was far too well versed in the London scale of human dignities since his marriage, not to look back with a blush at his desire of knighthood. "No use bothering our heads now about the plumes of an arrogant popinjay. To return to the subject we were discussing. You must be sure to let me have this money next week."

"Rely on it."

"And you'll not let my bills get into the market; keep them under lock and key."

"So we agreed."

"It is but a temporary difficulty—royal mourning, such nonsense — panic in trade, lest these precious ministers go out. I shall soon float over the troubled waters."

"By the help of a paper boat," said the Baron, laughing; and the two gentlemen shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER VI.

MEANWHILE Audley Egerton's carriage had deposited him at the door of Lord Lansmere's house, at Knightsbridge. He asked for the Countess, and was shown into the drawing-room, which was deserted. Egerton was paler than usual; and, as the door opened, he wiped the unwonted moisture from his forehead, and there was a quiver on his firm lip. The Countess, too, on entering, showed an emotion almost equally unusual to her self-control. She pressed Audley's hand in silence, and seating herself by his side, seemed to collect her thoughts. At length she said—

"It is rarely indeed that we meet, Mr Egerton, in spite of your intimacy with Lansmere and Harley. I go so little into your world, and you will not voluntarily come to me."

"Madam," replied Egerton, "I might evade your kind reproach by stating that my hours are not at my disposal; but I answer you with plain truth,—it must be painful to both of us to meet."

The Countess coloured and sighed, but did not dispute the assertion.

Audley resumed. "And therefore, I presume that, in sending for me, you have something of moment to communicate?"

"It relates to Harley," said the Countess, as if in apology; "and I would take your advice."

"To Harley! Speak on, I beseech you."

"My son has probably told you that he has educated and reared a young girl, with the intention to make her Lady L'Estrange, and hereafter Countess of Lansmere."

"Harley has no secrets from me," said Egerton, mournfully.

"This young lady has arrived in England—is here—in this house."

"And Harley too?"

"No, she came over with Lady N—— and her daughters. Harley was to follow shortly, and I expect him daily. Here is his letter. Observe, he has never yet communicated his intentions to this young person, now intrusted to my care—never spoken to her as the lover."

Egerton took the letter and read it rapidly, though with attention.

"True," said he, as he returned the letter: "and before he does so, he wishes you to see Miss Digby and to judge of her yourself—wishes to know if you will approve and sanction his choice."

"It is on this that I would consult you — a girl without rank;—the father, it is true, a gentleman, though almost equivocally one,— but the mother, I know not what. And Harley, for whom I hoped an alliance with the first houses in England!" The Countess pressed her hands convulsively together.

Egerton.—"He is no more a boy. His talents have been wasted — his life a wanderer's. He presents to you a chance of re-settling his mind, of re-arousing his native powers, of a home beside your own. Lady Lansmere, you cannot hesitate!"

Lady Lansmere.—"I do, I do! After all that I have hoped, after all that I did to prevent——"

Egerton (interrupting her).—"You owe him now an atonement; that is in your power—it is not in mine."

The Countess again pressed Audley's hand, and the tears gushed from her eyes.

"It shall be so. I consent—I consent. I will silence, I will crush back this proud heart. Alas! it well-nigh broke his own! I am glad you speak thus. I like to think he owes my consent to you. In that there is atonement for both."

"You are too generous, madam," said Egerton, evidently moved, though still, as ever, striving to repress emotion. "And now may I see the young lady? This conference pains me; you see even my strong nerves quiver; and at this time I have much to go through—need of all my strength and firmness."

"I hear, indeed, that the Government will probably retire. But it is with honour: it will be soon called back by the voice of the nation."

"Let me see the future wife of Harley L'Estrange," said Egerton, without heed of this consolatory exclamation.

The Countess rose and left the room. In a few minutes she returned with Helen Digby.

Helen was wondrously improved from the pale, delicate child, with the soft smile and intelligent eyes, who had sate by the side of Leonard in his garret. She was about the middle height, still slight, but beautifully formed; that exquisite roundness of proportion which conveys so well the idea of woman, in its undulating pliant grace—formed to embellish life, and soften away its rude angles—formed to embellish, not to protect. Her face might not have satisfied the critical eye of an artist—it was not without defects in regularity; but its expression was eminently gentle and prepossessing; and there were few who would not have exclaimed, "What a lovely countenance!" The mildness of her brow was touched with melancholy—her childhood had left its traces on her youth. Her step was slow, and her manner shy, subdued, and timid.

Audley gazed on her with earnestness as she approached him; and then coming forward, took her hand and kissed it.

"I am your guardian's constant friend," said he, and he drew her gently to a seat behind him, in the recess of a window. With a quick glance of his eye towards the Countess, he seemed to imply the wish to converse with Helen somewhat apart. So the Countess interpreted the glance; and though she remained in the room, she seated herself at a distance, and bent over a book.

It was touching to see how the austere man of business lent himself to draw forth the mind of this quiet, shrinking girl; and if you had listened, you would have comprehended how he came to possess such social influence, and how well, some time or other in the course of his life, he had learned to adapt himself to women.

He spoke first of Harley L'Estrange—spoke with tact and delicacy. Helen at first answered by monosyllables, and then, by degrees, with grateful and open affection. Audley's brow grew shaded. He then spoke of Italy, and though no man had less of the poet in his nature, yet, with the dexterity of one long versed in the world, and who has been accustomed to extract evidences from characters most opposed to his own, he suggested such topics as might serve to arouse poetry in others. Helen's replies betrayed a cultivated taste, and a charming womanly mind; but they betrayed, also, one accustomed to take its colourings from another's—to appreciate, admire, revere the Lofty and the Beautiful, but humbly and meekly. There was no vivid enthusiasm, no remark of striking originality, no flash of the self-kindling, creative faculty. Lastly, Egerton turned to England—to the critical nature of the times—to the claims which the country possessed upon all who had the ability to serve and guide its troubled destinies. He enlarged warmly on Harley's natural talents, and rejoiced that he had returned to England, perhaps to commence some great career. Helen looked surprised, but her face caught no correspondent glow from Audley's eloquence. He rose, and an expression of disappointment passed over his grave, handsome features, and as quickly vanished.

"Adieu! my dear Miss Digby; I fear I have wearied you, especially with my politics. Adieu, Lady Lansmere; no doubt I shall see Harley as soon as he returns."

Then he hastened from the room, gained his carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive to Downing Street. He drew down the blinds, and leant back. A certain languor became visible in his face, and once or twice he mechanically put his hand to his heart.

"She is good, amiable, docile—will make an excellent wife, no doubt," said he, murmuringly. "But does she love Harley as he has dreamed of love? No! Has she the power and energy to arouse his faculties, and restore to the world the Harley of old? No! Meant by Heaven to be the shadow of another's sun—not herself the sun—this child is not the one who can atone for the Past and illume the Future."

CHAPTER VII.

THAT evening Harley L'Estrange arrived at his father's house. The few years that had passed since we saw him last had made no perceptible change in his appearance. He still preserved his elastic youthfulness of form, and singular variety and play of countenance. He seemed unaffectedly rejoiced to greet his parents, and had something of the gaiety and the tenderness of a boy returned from school. His manner to Helen bespoke the chivalry that pervaded all the complexities and curves of his character. It was affectionate, but respectful. Hers to him, subdued—but innocently sweet and gently cordial. Harley was the chief talker. The aspect of the times was so critical that he could not avoid questions on politics; and, indeed, he showed an interest in them which he had never evinced before. Lord Lansmere was delighted.

"Why, Harley, you love your country, after all?"

"The moment she seems in danger—yes!" replied the Patrician; and the Sybarite seemed to rise into the Athenian.

Then he asked with eagerness about his old friend, Audley; and, his curiosity satisfied there, he inquired the last literary news. He had heard much of a book lately published. He named the one ascribed by Parson Dale to Professor Moss: none of his listeners had read it.

Harley pished at this, and accused them all of indolence and stupidity, in his own quaint, metaphorical style. Then he said—"And town gossip?"

"We never hear it," said Lady Lansmere.

"There is a new plough much talked of at Boodle's," said Lord Lansmere.

"God speed it. But is there not a new man much talked of at White's?"

"I don't belong to White's."

"Nevertheless, you may have heard of him—a foreigner, a Count di Peschiera."

"Yes," said Lord Lansmere; "he was pointed out to me in the Park—a handsome man for a foreigner; wears his hair properly cut; looks gentlemanlike and English."

"Ah, ah! He is here, then!" And Harley rubbed his hands.

"Which road did you take? did you pass the Simplon?"

"No; I came straight from Vienna."

Then, relating with lively vein his adventures by the way, he continued to delight Lord Lansmere by his gaiety till the time came to retire to rest. As soon as Harley was in his own room, his mother joined him.

"Well," said he, "I need not ask if you like Miss Digby? Who would not?"

"Harley, my own son," said the mother, bursting into tears, "be happy your own way; only be happy, that is all I ask."

Harley, much affected, replied gratefully and soothingly to this fond injunction. And then gradually leading his mother on to converse of Helen, asked abruptly—"And of the chance of our happiness—her happiness as well as mine—what is your opinion? Speak frankly."

"Of *her* happiness there can be no doubt," replied the mother, proudly. "Of yours, how can you ask me? Have you not decided on that yourself?"

"But still it cheers and encourages one in any experiment, however well considered, to hear the approval of another. Helen has certainly a most gentle temper."

"I should conjecture so. But her mind ——"

"Is very well stored."

"She speaks so little ——"

"Yes. I wonder why? She's surely a woman!"

"Pshaw," said the Countess, smiling, in spite of herself. "But tell me more of the process of your experiment. You took her as a child, and resolved to train her according to your own ideal. Was that easy?"

"It seemed so. I desired to instil habits of truth: she was already by nature truthful as the day; a taste for nature and all things natural—that seemed inborn; perceptions of Art as the interpreter of Nature—those were more difficult to teach. I think they may come. You have heard her play and sing?"

"No."

"She will surprise you. She has less talent for drawing; still, all that teaching could do has been done—in a word, she is accomplished. Temper, heart, mind—these are all excellent." Harley stopped and suppressed a sigh. "Certainly I ought to be very happy," said he; and he began to wind up his watch.

"Of course she must love you?" said the Countess, after a pause. "How could she fail?"

"Love me! My dear mother, that is the very question I shall have to ask."

"Ask! Love is discovered by a glance; it has no need of asking."

"I have never discovered it, then, I assure you. The fact is, that before her childhood was passed, I removed her, as you may suppose, from my roof. She resided with an Italian family, near my usual abode. I visited her often, directed her studies, watched her improvement ——"

"And fell in love with her?"

"Fall is such a very violent word. No; I don't remember to have had a fall. It was all a smooth inclined plane from the first step, until at last I said to myself, 'Harley L'Estrange, thy time has come. The bud has blossomed into flower. Take it to thy breast.' And myself replied to myself, meekly, 'So be it.' Then I found that Lady N——, with her daughters, was coming to England. I asked her ladyship to take my ward to your house. I wrote to you, and prayed your assent; and, that granted, I knew you would obtain my father's. I am here—you give me the approval I sought for. I will speak to Helen to-morrow. Perhaps, after all, she may reject me."

"Strange, strange — you speak thus coldly, thus lightly; you so capable of ardent love!"

"Mother," said Harley, earnestly, "be satisfied! *I* am! Love, as of old, I feel, alas! too well, can visit me never more. But gentle companionship, tender friendship, the relief and the sunlight of woman's smile —hereafter the voices of children—music that, striking on the hearts of both parents, wakens the most lasting and the purest of all sympathies: these are my hope. Is the hope so mean, my fond mother?"

Again the Countess wept, and her tears were not dried when she left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

Oh! Helen, fair Helen—type of the quiet, serene, unnoticed, deep-felt excellence of woman. Woman, less as the ideal that a poet conjures from the air, than as the companion of a poet on the earth! Woman, who, with her clear sunny vision of things actual, and the exquisite fibre of her delicate sense, supplies the deficiencies of him whose foot stumbles on the soil, because his eye is too intent upon the stars! Woman, the provident, the comforting—angel whose pinions are folded round the heart, guarding there a divine spring unmarred by the winter of the world! Helen, soft Helen, is it indeed in thee that the wild and brilliant "lord of wantonness and ease" is to find the regeneration of his life—the rebaptism of his soul? Of what avail thy meek prudent household virtues to one whom Fortune screens from rough trial?—whose sorrows lie remote from thy ken?—whose spirit, erratic and perturbed, now rising, now falling, needs a vision more subtle than thine to pursue, and a strength that can sustain the reason, when it droops, on the wings of enthusiasm and passion?

And thou, thyself, O Nature, shrinking and humble, that needest to be courted forth from the shelter, and developed under the calm and genial atmosphere of holy, happy love—can such affection as Harley L'Estrange may proffer suffice to thee? Will not the blossoms, yet folded in the petal, wither away beneath the shade that may protect them from the storm, and yet shut them from the sun? Thou who, where thou givest love, seekest, though meekly, for love in return, to be the soul's sweet necessity; the life's household partner to him who receives all thy faith and devotion—canst thou influence the sources of joy and of sorrow in the heart that does not heave at thy name? Hast thou the charm and the force of the moon, that the tides of that wayward sea shall ebb and flow at thy will? Yet who shall say—who conjecture how near two hearts can become, when no guilt lies between them, and time brings the ties all its own? Rarest of all things on earth is the union in which both, by their contrasts, make harmonious their blending; each supplying the defects of the helpmate, and completing, by fusion, one strong human soul! Happiness enough, where even Peace does but seldom preside, when each can bring to the altar, if not the flame, still the incense. Where man's thoughts are all noble and generous, woman's feelings all gentle and pure, love may follow, if it does not precede;—and if not,—if the roses be missed from the garland, one may sigh for the rose, but one is safe from the thorn.

The morning was mild, yet somewhat overcast by the mist which announces coming winter in London, and Helen walked musingly beneath the trees that surrounded the garden of Lord Lansmere's house. Many leaves were yet left on the boughs; but they were sere and withered. And the birds chirped at times; but their note was mournful and complaining. All within this house, until Harley's arrival, had been strange and saddening to Helen's timid and subdued spirits. Lady Lansmere had received her kindly, but with a certain restraint; and the loftiness of manner, common to the Countess with all but Harley, had awed and chilled the diffident orphan. Lady Lansmere's very interest in Harley's choice—her attempts to draw Helen out of her reserve—her watchful eyes whenever Helen shyly spoke, or shyly moved, frightened the poor child, and made her unjust to herself.

The very servants, though staid, grave, and respectful, as suited a dignified, old-fashioned household, painfully contrasted the bright welcoming smiles and free talk of Italian domestics. Her recollections of the happy warm Continental manner, which so sets the bashful at their ease, made the stately and cold precision of all around her doubly awful and dispiriting. Lord Lansmere himself, who did not as yet know the views of Harley, and little dreamed that he was to anticipate a daughter-in-law in the ward, whom he understood Harley, in a freak of generous romance, had adopted, was familiar and courteous, as became a host. But he looked upon Helen as a mere child, and naturally left her to the Countess. The dim sense of her equivocal position—of her comparative humbleness of birth and fortunes, oppressed and pained her; and even her gratitude to Harley was made burthensome by a sentiment of helplessness. The grateful long to requite. And what could she ever do for him?

Thus musing, she wandered alone through the curving walks; and this sort of mock country landscape—London loud, and even visible, beyond the high gloomy walls, and no escape from the windows of the square formal house—seemed a type of the prison bounds of Rank to one whose soul yearns for simple loving Nature.

Helen's reverie was interrupted by Nero's joyous bark. He had caught sight of her, and came bounding up, and thrust his large head into her hand. As she stooped to caress the dog, happy at his honest greeting, and tears that had been long gathering to the lids fell silently on his face (for I know nothing that more moves us to tears than the hearty kindness of a dog, when something in human beings has pained or chilled us), she heard behind the musical voice of Harley. Hastily she dried or repressed her tears, as her guardian came up, and drew her arm within his own.

"I had so little of your conversation last evening, my dear ward, that I may well monopolise you now, even to the privation of Nero. And so you are once more in your native land?"

Helen sighed softly.

"May I not hope that you return under fairer auspices than those which your childhood knew?"

Helen turned her eyes with ingenuous thankfulness to her guardian, and the memory of all she owed to him rushed upon her heart.

Harley renewed, and with earnest, though melancholy sweetness—"Helen, your eyes thank me; but hear me before your words do. I deserve no thanks. I am about to make to you a strange confession of egotism and selfishness."

"You!—oh, impossible!"

"Judge yourself, and then decide which of us shall have cause to be grateful. Helen, when I was scarcely your age—a boy in years, but more, methinks, a man at heart, with man's strong energies and sublime aspirings, than I have ever since been—I loved, and deeply——"

He paused a moment, in evident struggle. Helen listened in mute surprise, but his emotion awakened her own; her tender woman's heart yearned to console. Unconsciously her arm rested on his less lightly.

"Deeply, and for sorrow. It is a long tale, that may be told hereafter. The worldly would call my love a madness. I did not reason on it then—I cannot reason on it now. Enough: death smote suddenly, terribly, and to me mysteriously, her whom I loved. The love lived on. Fortunately, perhaps, for me, I had quick distraction, not to grief, but to its inert indulgence. I was a soldier; I joined our armies. Men called me brave. Flattery! I was a coward before the thought of life. I sought death: like sleep, it does not come at our call. Peace ensued. As when the winds fall, the sails droop—so when excitement ceased all seemed to me flat and objectless. Heavy, heavy was my heart. Perhaps grief had been less obstinate, but that I feared I had causes for self-reproach. Since then I have been a wanderer—a self-made exile. My boyhood had been ambitious—all ambition ceased. Flames, when they reach the core of the heart, spread, and leave all in ashes. Let me be brief: I did not mean thus weakly to complain—I to whom Heaven has given so many blessings! I felt, as it were, separated from the common objects and joys of men. I grew startled to see how, year by year, wayward humours possessed me. I resolved again to attach myself to some living heart—it was my sole chance to rekindle my own. But the one I had loved remained as my type of woman, and she was different from all I saw. Therefore I said to myself, 'I will rear from childhood some young fresh life, to grow up into my ideal.' As this thought began to haunt me, I chanced to discover you. Struck with the romance of your early life, touched by your courage, charmed by your affectionate nature, I said to myself, 'Here is what I seek.' Helen, in assuming the guardianship of your life, in all the culture which I have sought to bestow on your docile childhood, I repeat, that I have been but the egotist. And now, when you have reached that age when it becomes me to speak, and you to listen—now, when you are under the sacred roof of my own mother—now I ask you, can you accept this heart, such as wasted years, and griefs too fondly nursed, have left it? Can you be, at least, my comforter? Can you aid me to regard life as a duty, and recover those aspirations which once soared from the paltry and miserable confines of our frivolous daily being? Helen, here I ask you, can you be all this, and under the name of—Wife?"

It would be in vain to describe the rapid, varying, indefinable emotions that passed through the inexperienced heart of the youthful listener as Harley thus spoke. He so moved all the springs of amaze, compassion, tender respect, sympathy, childlike gratitude, that when he paused and gently took her hand, she remained bewildered, speechless, overpowered. Harley smiled as he gazed upon her blushing, downcast, expressive face. He conjectured at once that the idea of such proposals had never crossed her mind; that she had never contemplated him in the character of wooer; never even sounded her heart as to the nature of such feelings as his image had aroused.

"My Helen," he resumed, with a calm pathos of voice, "there is some disparity of years between us, and perhaps I may not hope henceforth for that love which youth gives to the young. Permit me simply to ask, what you will frankly answer—'Can you have seen in our quiet life abroad, or under the roof of your Italian friends, any one you prefer to me?'"

"No, indeed, no!" murmured Helen. "How could I?—who is like you?" Then, with a sudden effort—for her innate truthfulness took alarm, and her very affection for Harley, childlike and reverent, made her tremble lest she should deceive him—she drew a little aside, and spoke thus:—

"Oh, my dear guardian, noblest of all human beings, at least in my eyes, forgive, forgive me, if I seem ungrateful, hesitating; but I cannot, cannot think of myself as worthy of you. I never so lifted my eyes. Your rank, your position——"

"Why should they be eternally my curse? Forget them, and go on."

"It is not only they," said Helen, almost sobbing, "though they are much; but I your type, your ideal! —I?—impossible! Oh, how can I ever be anything even of use, of aid, of comfort, to one like you!"

"You can, Helen—you can," cried Harley, charmed by such ingenuous modesty. "May I not keep this hand?"

And Helen left her hand in Harley's, and turned away her face, fairly weeping. A stately step passed under the wintry trees.

"My mother," said Harley L'Estrange, looking up, "I present to you my future wife."

CHAPTER IX.

With a slow step and an abstracted air, Harley L'Estrange bent his way towards Egerton's house, after his eventful interview with Helen. He had just entered one of the streets leading into Grosvenor Square, when a young man, walking quickly from the opposite direction, came full against him, and drawing back with a brief apology, recognised him, and exclaimed, "What ! you in England, Lord L'Estrange ! Accept my congratulations on your return. But you seem scarcely to remember me."

"I beg your pardon, Mr Leslie. I remember you now by your smile ; but you are of an age in which it is permitted me to say that you look older than when I saw you last."

"And yet, Lord L'Estrange, it seems to me that you look younger."

Indeed, this reply was so far true that there appeared less difference of years than before between Leslie and L'Estrange ; for the wrinkles in the schemer's mind were visible in his visage, while Harley's dreamy worship of Truth and Beauty seemed to have preserved to the votary the enduring youth of the divinities.

Harley received the compliment with a supreme indifference, which might have been suitable to a Stoic, but which seemed scarcely natural to a gentleman who had just proposed to a lady many years younger than himself.

Leslie renewed—"Perhaps you are on your way to Mr Egerton's. If so, you will not find him at home; he is at his office."

"Thank you. Then to his office I must re-direct my steps."

"I am going to him myself," said Randal, hesitatingly.

L'Estrange had no prepossessions in favour of Leslie, from the little he had seen of that young gentleman; but Randal's remark was an appeal to his habitual urbanity, and he replied, with well-bred readiness, "Let us be companions so far."

Randal accepted the arm proffered to him; and Lord L'Estrange, as is usual with one long absent from his native land, bore part as a questioner in the dialogue that ensued.

"Egerton is always the same man, I suppose—too busy for illness, and too firm for sorrow?"

"If he ever feel either, he will never stoop to complain. But, indeed, my dear lord, I should like much to know what you think of his health."

"How? You alarm me!"

"Nay, I did not mean to do that; and pray do not let him know that I went so far. But I have fancied that he looks a little worn and suffering."

"Poor Audley!" said L'Estrange, in a tone of deep affection. "I will sound him, and, be assured, without naming you; for I know well how little he likes to be supposed capable of human infirmity. I am obliged to you for your hint—obliged to you for your interest in one so dear to me."

And Harley's voice was more cordial to Randal than it had ever been before. He then began to inquire what Randal thought of the rumours that had reached himself as to the probable defeat of the Government, and how far Audley's spirits were affected by such risks. But Randal here, seeing that Harley could communicate nothing, was reserved and guarded.

"Loss of office could not, I think, affect a man like Audley," observed Lord L'Estrange. "He would be as great in opposition—perhaps greater; and as to emoluments——"

"The emoluments are good," interposed Randal, with a half-sigh.

"Good enough, I suppose, to pay him back about a tenth of what his place costs our magnificent friend—No, I will say one thing for English statesmen, no man amongst them ever yet was the richer for place."

"And Mr Egerton's private fortune must be large, I take for granted," said Randal, carelessly.

"It ought to be, if he has time to look to it."

Here they passed by the hotel in which lodged the Count di Peschiera.

Randal stopped. "Will you excuse me for an instant? As we are passing this hotel, I will just leave my card here." So saying he gave his card to a waiter lounging by the door. "For the Count di Peschiera," said he aloud.

L'Estrange started; and as Randal again took his arm, said—"So that Italian lodges here? and you know him?"

"I know him but slightly, as one knows any foreigner who makes a sensation."

"He makes a sensation?"

"Naturally: for he is handsome, witty, and said to be very rich—that is, as long as he receives the revenues of his exiled kinsman."

"I see you are well informed, Mr Leslie. And what is supposed to bring hither the Count di Peschiera?"

"I did hear something, which I did not quite understand, about a bet of his that he would marry his kinsman's daughter; and so, I conclude, secure to himself all the inheritance; and that he is therefore here to discover the kinsman and win the heiress. But probably you know the rights of the story, and can tell me what credit to give to such gossip."

"I know this at least, that if he did lay such a wager, I would advise you to take any odds against him that his backers may give," said L'Estrange dryly; and while his lip quivered with anger, his eye gleamed with arch ironical humour.

"You think, then, that this poor kinsman will not need such an alliance in order to regain his estates?"

"Yes; for I never yet knew a rogue whom I would not bet against, when he backed his own luck as a rogue against Justice and Providence."

Randal winced, and felt as if an arrow had grazed his heart; but he soon recovered.

"And indeed there is another vague rumour that the young lady in question is married already—to some Englishman."

This time it was Harley who winced. "Good Heavens! that cannot be true—that would undo all! An Englishman just at this moment! But some Englishman of correspondent rank, I trust, or at least one known for opinions opposed to what an Austrian would call Revolutionary doctrines?"

"I know nothing. But it was supposed, merely a private gentleman of good family. Would not that suffice? Can the Austrian Court dictate a marriage to the daughter as a condition for grace to the father?"

"No—not that!" said Harley, greatly disturbed. "But put yourself in the position of any minister to one of the great European monarchies. Suppose a political insurgent, formidable for station and wealth, had been proscribed, much interest made on his behalf, a powerful party striving against it, and just when the minister is disposed to relent, he hears that the heiress to this wealth and this station is married to the native of a country in which sentiments friendly to the very opinions for which the insurgent was proscribed are popularly entertained, and thus that the fortune to be restored may be so employed as to disturb the national security—the existing order of things;—this, too, at the very time when a popular revolution has just occurred in France,* and its effects are felt most in the very land of the exile;—suppose all this, and then say if anything could be more untoward for the hopes of the banished man, or furnish his adversaries with stronger arguments against the restoration of his fortune? But pshaw—this must be a chimera! If true, I should have known of it."

"I quite agree with your lordship—there can be no truth in such a rumour. Some Englishman, hearing, perhaps, of the probable pardon of the exile, may have counted on an heiress, and spread the report in order to keep off other candidates. By your account, if successful in his suit, he might fail to find an heiress in the bride."

"No doubt of that. Whatever might be arranged, I can't conceive that he would be allowed to get at the fortune, though it might be held in suspense for his children. But indeed it so rarely happens that an Italian girl of high name marries a foreigner, that we must dismiss this notion with a smile at the long face of the hypothetical fortune-hunter. Heaven help him, if he exist!"

"Amen," echoed Randal, devoutly.

"I hear that Peschiera's sister is returned to England. Do you know her too?"

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* As there have been so many Revolutions in France, it may be convenient to suggest that, according to the dates of this story, Harley no doubt alludes to that revolution, which exiled Charles X., and placed Louis Philippe on the throne.

"A little."

"My dear Mr Leslie, pardon me if I take a liberty not warranted by our acquaintance. Against the lady I say nothing. Indeed, I have heard some things which appear to entitle her to compassion and respect. But as to Peschiera, all who prize honour suspect him to be a knave—I know him to be one. Now, I think that the longer we preserve that abhorrence for knavery which is the generous instinct of youth, why, the fairer will be our manhood, and the more reverend our age. You agree with me?" And Harley suddenly turning, his eyes fell like a flood of light upon Randal's pale and secret countenance.

"To be sure," murmured the schemer.

Harley, surveying him, mechanically recoiled, and withdrew his arm.

Fortunately for Randal, who somehow or other felt himself slipped into a false position, he scarce knew how or why, he was here seized by the arm; and a clear, open, manly voice cried, "My dear fellow, how are you? I see you are engaged now; but look into my rooms when you can, in the course of the day."

And with a bow of excuse for his interruption to Lord L'Estrange, the speaker was then turning away, when Harley said—

"No, don't let me take you from your friend, Mr Leslie. And you need not be in a hurry to see Egerton; for I shall claim the privilege of older friendship for the first interview."

"It is Mr Egerton's nephew, Frank Hazeldean."

"Pray, call him back, and present me to him. He has a face that would have gone far to reconcile Timon to Athens."

Randal obeyed, and after a few kindly words to Frank, Harley insisted on leaving the two young men together, and walked on to Downing Street with a brisker step.

CHAPTER X.

"THAT Lord L'Estrange seems a very good fellow."

"So-so;—an effeminate humourist—says the most absurd things, and fancies them wise. Never mind him. You wanted to speak to me, Frank?"

"Yes; I am so obliged to you for introducing me to Levy. I must tell you how handsomely he has behaved."

"Stop; allow me to remind you that I did not introduce you to Levy; you had met him before at Borrowell's, if I recollect right, and he dined with us at the Clarendon—that is all I had to do with bringing you together. Indeed I rather cautioned you against him than not. Pray don't think I introduced you to a man who, however pleasant and perhaps honest, is still a money-lender. Your father would be justly angry with me if I had done so."

"Oh, pooh! you are prejudiced against poor Levy. But just hear: I was sitting very ruefully, thinking over those cursed bills, and how the deuce I should renew them, when Levy walked into my rooms; and, after telling me of his long friendship for my uncle Egerton and his admiration for yourself, and (give me your hand, Randal) saying how touched he felt by your kind sympathy in my troubles, he opened his pocket-book, and showed me the bills safe and sound in his own possession."

"How?"

"He had bought them up. 'It must be so disagreeable to me,' he said, 'to have them flying about the London money-market, and those Jews would be sure sooner or later to apply to my father. And now,' added Levy, 'I am in no immediate hurry for the money, and we must put the interest upon fairer terms.' In short, nothing could be more liberal than his tone. And he says, 'he is thinking of a way to relieve me altogether, and will call about it in a few days, when his plan is matured.' After all, I must owe this to you, Randal. I dare swear you put it into his head."

"O no, indeed! On the contrary, I still say, 'Be cautious in all your dealings with Levy.' I don't know, I'm sure, what he means to propose. Have you heard from the Hall lately?"

"Yes—to-day. Only think—the Riccaboccas have disappeared. My mother writes me word of it—a very odd letter. She seems to suspect that I know where they are, and reproaches me for 'mystery'—quite enigmatical. But there is one sentence in her letter—see, here it is in the postscript—which seems to refer to Beatrice: 'I don't ask you to tell me your secrets, Frank, but Randal will no doubt have assured you that my first consideration will be for your own happiness, in any matter in which your heart is really engaged.'"

"Yes," said Randal, slowly; "no doubt this refers to Beatrice; but, as I told you, your mother will not interfere one way or the other—such interference would weaken her influence with the Squire. Besides, as she said, she can't *wish* you to marry a foreigner; though once married, she would——But how do you stand now with the Marchesa? Has she consented to accept you?"

"Not quite; indeed, I have not actually proposed. Her manner, though much softened, has not so far emboldened me; and, besides, before a positive declaration, I certainly must go down to the Hall and speak at least to my mother."

"You must judge for yourself, but don't do anything rash: talk first to me. Here we are at my office. Good-by; and—and pray believe that, in whatever you do with Levy, I have no hand in it."

CHAPTER XI.

Towards the evening Randal was riding fast on the road to Norwood. The arrival of Harley, and the conversation that had passed between that nobleman and Randal, made the latter anxious to ascertain how far Riccabocca was likely to learn L'Estrange's return to England, and to meet with him. For he felt that, should the latter come to know that Riccabocca, in his movements, had gone by Randal's advice, Harley would find that Randal had spoken to him disingenuously; and, on the other hand, Riccabocca, placed under the friendly protection of Lord L'Estrange, would no longer need Randal Leslie to defend him from the machinations of Peschiera. To a reader happily unaccustomed to dive into the deep and mazy recesses of a schemer's mind, it might seem that Randal's interest in retaining a hold over the exile's confidence would terminate with the assurances that had reached him, from more than one quarter, that Violante might cease to be an heiress if she married himself. "But perhaps," suggests some candid and youthful conjecturer —"perhaps Randal Leslie is in love with this fair creature?" Randal in love!—no! He was too absorbed by harder passions for that blissful folly. Nor, if he could have fallen in love, was Violante the one to attract that sullen secret heart; her instinctive nobleness, the very stateliness of her beauty, womanlike though it was, awed him. Men of that kind may love some soft slave—they cannot lift their eyes to a queen. They may look down—they cannot look up. But, on the one hand, Randal could not resign altogether the *chance* of securing a fortune that would realise his most dazzling dreams, upon the mere assurance, however probable, which had so dismayed him; and, on the other hand, should he be compelled to relinquish all idea of such alliance, though he did not contemplate the base perfidy of actually assisting Peschiera's avowed designs, still, if Frank's marriage with Beatrice should absolutely depend upon her brother's obtaining the knowledge of Violante's retreat, and that marriage should be as conducive to his interests as he thought he could make it, why—he did not then push his deductions farther, even to himself, they seemed too black; but he sighed heavily, and that sigh foreboded how weak would be honour and virtue against avarice and ambition. Therefore, on all accounts, Riccabocca was one of those cards in a sequence, which so calculating a player would not throw out of his hand: it *might* serve for repique—at the worst, it might score well in the game. Intimacy with the Italian was still part and parcel in that knowledge which was the synonym of power.

While the young man was thus meditating, on his road to Norwood, Riccabocca and his Jemima were close conferring in their drawing-room. And if you could have there seen them, reader, you would have been seized with equal surprise and curiosity; for some extraordinary communication had certainly passed between them. Riccabocca was evidently much agitated, and with emotions not familiar to him. The tears stood in his eyes at the same time that a smile, the reverse of cynical or sardonic, curved his lips; while his wife was leaning her head on his shoulder, her hand clasped in his, and, by the expression of her face, you might guess that he had paid her some very gratifying compliment, of a nature more genuine and sincere than those which characterised his habitual hollow and dissimulating gallantry. But just at this moment Giacomo entered, and Jemima, with her native English modesty, withdrew in haste from Riccabocca's sheltering side.

"Padrone," said Giacomo, who, whatever his astonishment at the connubial position he had disturbed, was much too discreet to betray it—"Padrone, I see the young Englishman riding towards the house, and I hope, when he arrives, you will not forget the alarming information I gave to you this morning."

"Ah—ah!" said Riccabocca, his face falling.

"If the Signorina were but married!"

"My very thought—my constant thought!" exclaimed Riccabocca. "And you really believe the young Englishman loves her?"

"Why else should he come, Excellency?" asked Giacomo, with great *naïveté*.

"Very true; why, indeed?" said Riccabocca. "Jemima, I cannot endure the terrors I suffer on that poor child's account. I will open myself frankly to Randal Leslie. And now, too, that which might have been a serious consideration, in case I return to Italy, will no longer stand in our way, Jemima."

Jemima smiled faintly, and whispered something to Riccabocca, to which he replied—

"Nonsense, *anima mia*. I know it *will* be—have not a doubt of it—I tell you it is as nine to four, according to the nicest calculations. I will speak at once to Randal. He is too young—too timid to speak himself."

"Certainly," interposed Giacomo; "how could he dare to speak, let him love ever so well?"

Jemima shook her head.

"Oh, never fear," said Riccabocca, observing this gesture; "I will give him the trial. If he entertain but mercenary views, I shall soon detect them. I know human nature pretty well, I think, my love; and, Giacomo,—just get me my Machiavelli;—that's right. Now leave me, my dear; I must reflect, and prepare myself."

When Randal entered the house, Giacomo, with a smile of peculiar suavity, ushered him into the drawing-room. He found Riccabocca alone, and seated before the fireplace, leaning his face on his hand, with the great folio of Machiavelli lying open on the table.

The Italian received him as courteously as usual; but there was in his manner a certain serious and thoughtful dignity, which was perhaps the more imposing because but rarely assumed. After a few preliminary observations, Randal remarked that Frank Hazeldean had informed him of the curiosity which the disappearance of the Riccaboccas had excited at the Hall, and inquired carelessly if the Doctor had left instructions as to the forwarding of any letters that might be directed to him at the Casino.

"Letters," said Riccabocca, simply; "I never receive any, or at least so rarely that it was not worth while to take an event so little to be expected into consideration. No; if any letters do reach the Casino, there they will wait."

"Then I can see no possibility of indiscretion,—no chance of a clue to your address."

"Nor I either."

Satisfied so far, and knowing that it was not in Riccabocca's habits to read the newspapers, by which he might otherwise have learnt of L'Estrange's arrival in London, Randal then proceeded to inquire, with much seeming interest, into the health of Violante—hoped it did not suffer by confinement, &c. Riccabocca eyed him gravely while he spoke, and then suddenly rising, that air of dignity to which I have before referred became yet more striking.

"My young friend," said he, "hear me attentively, and answer me frankly. I know human nature—" Here a slight smile of proud complacency passed the sage's lips, and his eye glanced toward his Machiavelli. "I know human nature—at least I have studied it," he renewed more earnestly, and with less evident self-conceit; "and I believe that when a perfect stranger to me exhibits an interest in my affairs, which occasions him no small trouble—an interest," continued the wise man, laying his hand on Randal's shoulder, "which scarcely a son could exceed, he must be under the influence of some strong personal motive."

"Oh, sir!" cried Randal, turning a shade more pale, and with a faltering tone. Riccabocca surveyed him with the tenderness of a superior being, and pursued his deductive theories.

"In your case, what is that motive? Not political; for I conclude you share the opinions of your government, and those opinions have not favoured mine. Not that of pecuniary or ambitious calculations; for how can such calculations enlist you on behalf of a ruined exile? What remains? Why, the motive which at your age is ever the most natural and the strongest. I don't blame you. Machiavelli himself allows that such a motive has swayed the wisest minds, and overturned the most solid states. In a word, young man, you are in love, and with my daughter Violante."

Randal was so startled by this direct and unexpected charge upon his own masked batteries, that he did not even attempt his defence. His head drooped on his breast, and he remained speechless.

"I do not doubt," resumed the penetrating judge of human nature, "that you would have been withheld by the laudable and generous scruples which characterise your happy age, from voluntarily disclosing to me the state of your heart. You might suppose that, proud of the position I once held, or sanguine in the hope of regaining my inheritance, I might be over-ambitious in my matrimonial views for Violante; or that you, anticipating my restoration to honours and fortune, might seem actuated by the last motives which influence love and youth; and, therefore, my dear young friend, I have departed from the ordinary custom in England, and adopted a very common one in my own country. With us, a suitor seldom presents himself till he is assured of the consent of a father. I have only to say this—If I am right, and you love my daughter, my first object in life is to see her safe and secure; and, in a word—you understand me."

Now, mightily may it comfort and console us ordinary mortals, who advance no pretence to superior wisdom and ability, to see the huge mistakes made by both these very sagacious personages—Dr Riccabocca, valuing himself on his profound acquaintance with character, and Randal Leslie, accustomed to grope into every hole and corner of thought and action, wherefrom to extract that knowledge which is power! For whereas the sage, judging not only by his own heart in youth, but by the general influence of the master passion on the young, had ascribed to Randal sentiments wholly foreign to that able diplomatist's nature; so no sooner had Riccabocca brought his speech to a close, than

Randal, judging also by his own heart, and by the general laws which influence men of the mature age and boasted worldly wisdom of the pupil of Machiavelli, instantly decided that Riccabocca presumed upon his youth and inexperience, and meant most nefariously to take him in.

"The poor youth!" thought Riccabocca, "how unprepared he is for the happiness I give him!"

"The cunning old Jesuit!" thought Randal; "he has certainly learned, since we met last, that he has no chance of regaining his patrimony, and so he wants to impose on me the hand of a girl without a shilling. What other motive can he possibly have? Had his daughter the remotest probability of becoming the greatest heiress in Italy, would he dream of bestowing her on me in this off-hand way? The thing stands to reason."

Actuated by his resentment at the trap thus laid for him, Randal was about to disclaim altogether the disinterested and absurd affection laid to his charge, when it occurred to him that, by so doing, he might mortally offend the Italian—since the cunning never forgive those who refuse to be duped by them—and it might still be conducive to his interest to preserve intimate and familiar terms with Riccabocca; therefore, subduing his first impulse, he exclaimed—

"O too generous man! pardon me if I have so long been unable to express my amaze, my gratitude; but I cannot—no, I cannot, while your prospects remain thus uncertain, avail myself of your—of your inconsiderate magnanimity. Your rare conduct can only redouble my own scruples, if you, as I firmly hope and believe, are restored to your great possessions—you would naturally look so much higher than me. Should these hopes fail, then, indeed, it may be different; yet even then, what position, what fortune, have I to offer to your daughter worthy of her?"

"You are well-born! all gentlemen are equals," said Riccabocca, with a sort of easy nobleness. "You have youth, information, talent—sources of certain wealth in this happy country—powerful connections; and, in fine, if you are satisfied with marrying for love, I shall be contented;—if not, speak openly. As to the restoration to my possessions, I can scarcely think that probable while my enemy lives. And even in that case, since I saw you last, something has occurred," added Riccabocca, with a strange smile, which seemed to Randal singularly sinister and malignant, "that may remove all difficulties. Meanwhile, do not think me so extravagantly magnanimous—do not underrate the satisfaction I must feel at knowing Violante safe from the designs of Peschiera—safe, and for ever, under a husband's roof. I will tell you an Italian proverb—it contains a truth full of wisdom and terror!—

"'Hai cinquanta amici?—non basta.—Hai un nemico?—è troppo.'" *

"Something has occurred!" echoed Randal, not heeding the conclusion of this speech, and scarcely

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* Have you fifty friends?—it is not enough.—Have you one enemy?—it is too much.

hearing the proverb which the sage delivered in his most emphatic and tragic tone. "Something has occurred! My dear friend, be plainer. What has occurred?" Riccabocca remained silent. "Something that induces you to bestow your daughter on me?"

Riccabocca nodded, and emitted a low chuckle.

"The very laugh of a fiend," muttered Randal. "Something that makes her not worth bestowing. He betrays himself. Cunning people always do."

"Pardon me," said the Italian at last, "if I don't answer your question; you will know later; but, at present, this is a family secret. And now I must turn to another and more alarming cause for my frankness to you." Here Riccabocca's face changed, and assumed an expression of mingled rage and fear. "You must know," he added, sinking his voice, "that Giacomo has seen a strange person loitering about the house, and looking up at the windows; and he has no doubt —nor have I—that this is some spy or emissary of Peschiera's."

"Impossible; how could he discover you?"

"I know not; but no one else has any interest in doing so. The man kept at a distance, and Giacomo could not see his face."

"It may be but a mere idler. Is this all?"

"No; the old woman who serves us said that she was asked at a shop 'if we were not Italians?'"

"And she answered?"

"'No;' but owned that 'we had a foreign servant, Giacomo.'"

"I will see to this. Rely on it that if Peschiera has discovered you, I will learn it. Nay, I will hasten from you in order to commence inquiry."

"I cannot detain you. May I think that we have now an interest in common?"

"O indeed, yes; but—but—your daughter! how can I dream that one so beautiful, so peerless, will confirm the hope you have extended to me?"

"The daughter of an Italian is brought up to consider that it is a father's right to dispose of her hand."

"But the heart?"

"*Cospetto!*" said the Italian, true to his infamous notions as to the sex, "the heart of a girl is like a convent—the holier the cloister, the more charitable the door."

CHAPTER XII.

RANDAL had scarcely left the house before Mrs Riccabocca, who was affectionately anxious in all that concerned Violante, rejoined her husband.

"I like the young man very well," said the sage—"very well, indeed. I find him just what I expected from my general knowledge of human nature; for as love ordinarily goes with youth, so modesty usually accompanies talent. He is young, *ergo* he is in love; he has talent, *ergo* he is modest—modest and ingenuous."

"And you think not in any way swayed by interest in his affections?"

"Quite the contrary; and to prove him the more, I have not said a word as to the worldly advantages which, in any case, would accrue to him from an alliance with my daughter. In any case; for if I regain my country, her fortune is assured; and if not, I trust," said the poor exile, lifting his brow with stately and becoming pride, "that I am too well aware of my child's dignity, as well as my own, to ask any one to marry her to his own worldly injury."

"Eh! I don't quite understand you, Alphonso. To be sure, your dear life is insured for her marriage-portion; but——"

"*Pazzie*—stuff!" said Riccabocca, petulantly; "her marriage-portion would be as nothing to a young man of Randal's birth and prospects. I think not of that. But listen: I have never consented to profit by Harley L'Estrange's friendship for me; my scruples would not extend to my son-in-law. This noble friend has not only high rank, but considerable influence—influence with the Government—influence with Randal's patron —who, between ourselves, does not seem to push the young man as he might do; I judge by what Randal says. I should write, therefore, before anything was settled, to L'Estrange, and I should say to him simply, 'I never asked you to save me from penury, but I do ask you to save a daughter of my house from humiliation. I can give to her no dowry; can her husband owe to my friend that advance in an honourable career—that opening to energy and talent—which is more than a dowry to generous ambition?'"

"Oh, it is in vain you would disguise your rank," cried Jemima, with enthusiasm; "it speaks in all you utter, when your passions are moved."

The Italian did not seem flattered by that eulogy. "Pish," said he, "there you are! rank again!"

But Jemima was right. There was something about her husband that was grandiose and princely, whenever he escaped from his accursed Machiavelli, and gave fair play to his heart.

And he spent the next hour or so in thinking over all that he could do for Randal, and devising for his intended son-in-law the agreeable surprises, which Randal was at that very time racking his yet cleverer brains to disappoint.

These plans conned sufficiently, Riccabocca shut up his Machiavelli, and hunted out of his scanty collection of books Buffon on *Man*, and various other psychological volumes, in which he soon became deeply absorbed. Why were these works the object of the sage's study? Perhaps he will let us know soon, for it is clearly a secret known to his wife; and though she has hitherto kept one secret, that is precisely the reason why Riccabocca would not wish long to overburthen her discretion with another.

CHAPTER XIII.

Randal reached home in time to dress for a late dinner at Baron Levy's.

The Baron's style of living was of that character especially affected both by the most acknowledged exquisites of that day, and, it must be owned, also by the most egregious *parvenus.* For it is noticeable that it is your *parvenu* who always comes nearest in fashion (so far as externals are concerned) to your genuine exquisite. It is your *parvenu* who is most particular as to the cut of his coat, and the precision of his equipage, and the minutiæ of his *ménage.* Those between the *parvenu* and the exquisite, who know their own consequence, and have something solid to rest upon, are slow in following all the caprices of fashion, and obtuse in observation as to those niceties which neither give them another ancestor, nor add another thousand to the account at their banker's;—as to the last, rather, indeed the contrary! There was a decided elegance about the Baron's house and his dinner. If he had been one of the lawful kings of the dandies, you would have cried, "What perfect taste!"—but such is human nature, that the dandies who dined with him said to each other, "He pretend to imitate D—— ! vulgar dog !" There was little affectation of your more showy opulence. The furniture in the rooms was apparently simple, but, in truth, costly, from its luxurious comfort—the ornaments and china scattered about the commodes were of curious rarity and great value; and the pictures on the walls were gems. At dinner, no plate was admitted on the table. The Russian fashion, then uncommon, now more prevalent, was adopted—fruit and flowers in old *Sèvres* dishes of priceless *vertu*, and in sparkling glass of Bohemian fabric. No livery servant was permitted to wait; behind each guest stood a gentleman dressed so like the guest himself, in fine linen and simple black, that guest and lacquey seemed stereotypes from one plate.

The viands were exquisite; the wine came from the cellars of deceased archbishops and ambassadors. The company was select; the party did not exceed eight. Four were the eldest sons of peers (from a baron to a duke); one was a professed wit, never to be got without a month's notice, and where a *parvenu* was host, a certainty of green peas and peaches—out of season; the sixth, to Randal's astonishment, was Mr Richard Avenel; himself and the Baron made up the complement.

The eldest sons recognised each other with a meaning smile; the most juvenile of them, indeed (it was his first year in London), had the grace to blush and look sheepish. The others were more hardened; but they all united in regarding with surprise both Randal and

Dick Avenel. The former was known to most of them personally, and to all, by repute, as a grave, clever, promising young man, rather prudent than lavish, and never suspected to have got into a scrape. What the deuce did he do there? Mr Avenel puzzled them yet more. A middle-aged man, said to be in business, whom they had observed "about town" (for he had a noticeable face and figure)—that is, seen riding in the Park, or lounging in the pit at the opera, but never set eyes on at a recognised club, or in the coteries of their "set;" a man whose wife gave horrid third-rate parties, that took up half a column in the *Morning Post* with a list of "The Company Present," in which a sprinkling of dowagers fading out of fashion, and a foreign title or two, made the darkness of the obscurer names doubly dark. Why this man should be asked to meet *them*, by Baron Levy, too—a decided tuft-hunter and would-be exclusive—called all their faculties into exercise. The wit, who, being the son of a small tradesman, but in the very best society, gave himself far greater airs than the young lords, impertinently solved the mystery. —"Depend on it," whispered he to Spendquick—"depend on it the man is the X.Y. of the *Times*, who offers to lend any sum of money from £10 to half a million. He's the man who has all your bills; Levy is only his jackal."

"'Pon my soul," said Spendquick, rather alarmed, "if that's the case, one may as well be civil to him."

"*You*, certainly," said the wit. "But I never have found an X.Y. who would advance me the L. s.; and therefore, I shall not be more respectful to X.Y. than to any other unknown quantity."

By degrees, as the wine circulated, the party grew gay and sociable. Levy was really an entertaining fellow; had all the gossip of the town at his fingers' ends; and possessed, moreover, that pleasant art of saying ill-natured things of the absent, which those present always enjoy. By degrees, too, Mr Richard Avenel came out; and, as the whisper had circulated round the table that he was X.Y., he was listened to with a profound respect, which greatly elevated his spirits. Nay, when the wit tried once to show him up or mystify him, Dick answered with a bluff spirit, that, though very coarse, was found so humorous by Lord Spendquick and other gentlemen similarly situated in the money-market, that they turned the laugh against the wit, and silenced him for the rest of the night—a circumstance which made the party go off much more pleasantly. After dinner, the conversation, quite that of single men, easy and *débonnaire*, glanced from the turf, and the ballet, and the last scandal, towards politics; for the times were such that politics were discussed everywhere, and three of the young lords were county members.

Randal said little, but, as was his wont, listened attentively; and he was aghast to find how general was the belief that the Government was doomed. Out of regard to him, and with that delicacy of breeding which belongs to a certain society, nothing personal to Egerton was said, except by Avenel, who, however, on blurting out some rude expressions respecting that minister, was instantly checked by the Baron.

"Spare my friend, and Mr Leslie's near connection," said he, with a polite but grave smile.

"Oh," said Avenel, "public men, whom we pay, are public property—aren't they, my lord?" appealing to Spendquick.

"Certainly," said Spendquick, with great spirit—"public property, or why should we pay them? There must be a very strong motive to induce us to do that! I hate paying people. In fact," he subjoined, in an aside, "I never do."

"However," resumed Mr Avenel, graciously, "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Mr Leslie. As to the feelings of our host, the Baron, I calculate that they have got tolerably tough by the exercise they have gone through."

"Nevertheless," said the Baron, joining in the laugh which any lively saying by the supposed X.Y. was sure to excite—"nevertheless, 'love me, love my dog,' love me, love my Egerton."

Randal started, for his quick ear and subtle intelligence caught something sinister and hostile in the tone with which Levy uttered this equivocal comparison, and his eye darted towards the Baron. But the Baron had bent down his face, and was regaling himself upon an olive.

By-and-by the party rose from table. The four young noblemen had their engagements elsewhere, and proposed to separate without re-entering the drawing-room.

As, in Goethe's theory, monads which have affinities with each other are irresistibly drawn together, so these gay children of pleasure had, by a common impulse, on rising from table, moved each to each, and formed a group round the fireplace. Randal stood a little apart, musing; the wit examined the pictures through his eye-glass; and Mr Avenel drew the Baron towards the sideboard, and there held him in whispered conference. This colloquy did not escape the young gentlemen round the fireplace; they glanced towards each other.

"Settling the per-centage on renewal," said one, *sotto voce.*

"X.Y. does not seem such a very bad fellow," said another.

"He looks rich, and talks rich," said a third.

"A decided independent way of expressing his sentiments; those moneyed men generally have."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Spendquick, who had been keeping his eye anxiously fixed on the pair, "do look; X.Y. is actually taking out his pocket-book; he is coming this way. Depend on it he has got our bills—mine is due to-morrow!"

"And mine too," said another, edging off. "Why, it is a perfect *guet-à-pens.*"

Meanwhile, breaking away from the Baron, who appeared anxious to detain him, and failing in that attempt, turned aside, as if not to see Dick's movements—a circumstance which did not escape the notice of the group, and confirmed all their suspicions, Mr Avenel, with a serious, thoughtful face, and a slow step, approached the group. Nor did the great Roman general more nervously "flutter the dove-cots in Corioli," than did the advance of the supposed X.Y. agitate the bosoms of Lord Spendquick and his sympathising friends. Pocket-book in hand, and apparently feeling for something formidable within its mystic recesses, step by step came Dick Avenel towards the fireplace. The group stood still, fascinated by horror.

"Hum," said Mr Avenel, clearing his throat.

"I don't like that hum at all," muttered Spendquick.

"Proud to have made your acquaintance, gentlemen," said Dick, bowing.

The gentlemen, thus addressed, bowed low in return.

"My friend the Baron thought this not exactly the time to—" Dick stopped a moment; you might have knocked down those four young gentlemen, though four finer specimens of humanity no aristocracy in Europe could produce—you might have knocked them down with a feather! "But," renewed Avenel, not finishing his sentence, "I have made it a rule in life never to lose securing a good opportunity; in short, to make the most of the present moment. And," added he, with a smile which froze the blood in Lord Spendquick's veins, "the rule has made me a very warm man! Therefore, gentlemen, allow me to present you each with one of these"—every hand retreated behind the back of its well-born owner—when, to the inexpressible relief of all, Dick concluded with—"a little *soirée dansante*," and extended four cards of invitation.

"Most happy!" exclaimed Spendquick. "I don't dance in general; but to oblige X——I mean to have a better acquaintance, sir, with *you*—I would dance on the tight-rope."

There was a good-humoured, pleasant laugh at Spendquick's enthusiasm, and a general shaking of hands and pocketing of the invitation cards.

"You don't look like a dancing man," said Avenel, turning to the wit, who was plump and somewhat gouty—as wits who dine out five days in the week generally are; "but we shall have supper at one o'clock."

Infinitely offended and disgusted, the wit replied, drily, "that every hour of his time was engaged for the rest of the season," and, with a stiff salutation to the Baron, took his departure. The rest, in good spirits, hurried away to their respective cabriolets; and Leslie was following them into the hall, when the Baron, catching hold of him, said, "Stay, I want to talk to you."

CHAPTER XIV.

The Baron turned into his drawing-room, and Leslie followed.

"Pleasant young men, those," said Levy, with a slight sneer, as he threw himself into an easy chair and stirred the fire. "And not at all proud; but, to be sure, they are—under great obligations to me. Yes; they owe me a great deal. *Apropos*, I have had a long talk with Frank Hazeldean—fine young man—remarkable capacities for business. I can arrange his affairs for him. I find, on reference to the Will Office, that you were quite right; the Casino property is entailed on Frank. He will have the fee-simple. He can dispose of the reversion entirely. So that there will be no difficulty in our arrangements."

"But I told you also that Frank had scruples about borrowing on the event of his father's death."

"Ay—you did so. Filial affection! I never take that into account in matters of business. Such little scruples, though they are highly honourable to human nature, soon vanish before the prospect of the King's Bench. And, too, as you so judiciously remarked, our clever young friend is in love with Madame di Negra."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No; but Madame di Negra did!"

"You know her?"

"I know most people in good society, who now and then require a friend in the management of their affairs. And having made sure of the fact you stated, as to Hazeldean's contingent property (excuse my prudence), I have accommodated Madame di Negra, and bought up her debts."

"You have? You surprise me!"

"The surprise will vanish on reflection. But you are very new to the world yet, my dear Leslie. By the way, I have had an interview with Peschiera——"

"About his sister's debts?"

"Partly. A man of the nicest honour is Peschiera."

Aware of Levy's habit of praising people for the qualities in which, according to the judgment of less penetrating mortals, they were most deficient, Randal only smiled at this eulogy, and waited for Levy to resume. But the Baron sat silent and thoughtful for a minute or two, and then wholly changed the subject.

"I think your father has some property in ——shire, and you probably can give me a little information as to certain estates of a Mr Thornhill, estates which, on examination of the title-deeds, I find once, indeed, belonged to your family." The Baron glanced at a very elegant memorandum-book.—"The manors of Rood and Dulmansberry, with sundry farms thereon. Mr Thornhill wants to sell them—an old client of mine, Thornhill. He has applied to me on the matter. Do you think it an improvable property ?"

Randal listened with a livid cheek and a throbbing heart. We have seen that, if there was one ambitious scheme in his calculation which, though not absolutely generous and heroic, still might win its way to a certain sympathy in the undebased human mind, it was the hope to restore the fallen fortunes of his ancient house, and repossess himself of the long-alienated lands that surrounded the dismal wastes of the mouldering hall. And now to hear that those lands were getting into the inexorable gripe of Levy—tears of bitterness stood in his eyes.

"Thornhill," continued Levy, who watched the young man's countenance—"Thornhill tells me that that part of his property—the old Leslie lands—produces £2000 a-year, and that the rental could be raised. He would take £50,000 for it—£20,000 down, and suffer the remaining £30,000 to lie on mortgage at four per cent. It seems a very good purchase. What do you say ?"

"Don't ask me," said Randal, stung into rare honesty ; "for I had hoped I might live to repossess myself of that property."

"Ah ! indeed. It would be a very great addition to your consequence in the world—not from the mere size of the estate, but from its hereditary associations. And if you have any idea of the purchase—believe me, I'll not stand in your way."

"How can I have any idea of it ?"

"But I thought you said you had."

"I understood that these lands could not be sold till Mr Thornhill's son came of age, and joined in getting rid of the entail."

"Yes, so Thornhill himself supposed, till, on examining the title-deeds, I found he was under a mistake. These lands are not comprised in the settlement made by old Jasper Thornhill, which ties up the rest of the property. The title will be perfect. Thornhill wants to settle the matter at once—losses on the turf, you understand; an immediate purchaser would get still better terms. A Sir John Spratt would give the money;—but the addition of these lands would make the Spratt property of more consequence in the county than the Thornhill. So my client would rather take a few thousands less from a man who don't set up to be his rival. Balance of power in counties as well as nations."

Randal was silent.

"Well," said Levy, with great kindness of manner, "I see I pain you; and though I am what my very pleasant guests would call a *parvenu*, I comprehend your natural feelings as a gentleman of ancient birth. *Parvenu!* Ah! is it not strange, Leslie, that no wealth, no fashion, no fame, can wipe out that blot? They call me a *parvenu*, and borrow my money. They call our friend the wit, a *parvenu*, and submit to all his insolence—if they condescend to regard his birth at all—provided they can but get him to dinner. They call the best debater in the Parliament of England a *parvenu,* and will entreat him, some day or other, to be prime minister, and ask him for stars and garters. A droll world, and no wonder the *parvenus* want to upset it."

Randal had hitherto supposed that this notorious tuft-hunter — this dandy capitalist — this money-lender, whose whole fortune had been wrung from the wants and follies of an aristocracy, was naturally a firm supporter of things as they are—how could things be better for men like Baron Levy? But the usurer's burst of democratic spleen did not surprise his precocious and acute faculty of observation. He had before remarked, that it is the persons who fawn most upon an aristocracy, and profit the most by the fawning, who are ever at heart its bitterest disparagers. Why is this? Because one full half of democratic opinion is made up of envy; and we can only envy what is brought before our eyes, and what, while very near to us, is still unattainable. No man envies an archangel.

"But," said Levy, throwing himself back in his chair, "a new order of things is commencing; we shall see. Leslie, it is lucky for you that you did not enter Parliament under the Government; it would be your political ruin for life."

"You think, then, that the Ministry really cannot last?"

"Of course I do; and what is more, I think that a ministry of the same principles cannot be restored. You are a young man of talent and spirit; your birth is nothing compared to the rank of the reigning party; it would tell, to a certain degree, in a democratic one. I say, you should be more civil to Avenel; he could return you to Parliament at the next election."

"The next election! In six years! We have just had a general election."

"There will be another before this year, or half of it, or perhaps a quarter of it, is out."

"What makes you think so?"

"Leslie, let there be confidence between us; we can help each other. Shall we be friends?"

"With all my heart. But though you may help me, how can I help you?"

"You have helped me already to Frank Hazeldean and the Casino estate. All clever men can help me. Come, then, we are friends; and what I say is secret. You ask me why I think there will be a general election so soon? I will answer you frankly. Of all the public men I ever met with, there is no one who has so clear a vision of things immediately before him as Audley Egerton."

"He has that character. Not *far*-seeing, but *clear*-sighted to a certain limit."

"Exactly so. No one better, therefore, knows public opinion, and its immediate ebb and flow."

"Granted."

"Egerton, then, counts on a general election within three months; and I have lent him the money for it."

"Lent him the money! Egerton borrow money of you—the rich Audley Egerton!"

"Rich!" repeated Levy in a tone impossible to describe, and accompanying the word with that movement of the middle finger and thumb, commonly called a "snap," which indicates profound contempt.

He said no more. Randal sat stupified. At length the latter muttered, "But if Egerton is really not rich—if he lose office, and without the hope of return to it——"

"If so, he is ruined!" said Levy, coldly; "and therefore, from regard to you, and feeling interest in your future fate, I say—Rest no hopes of fortune or career upon Audley Egerton. Keep your place for the present, but be prepared at the next election to stand upon popular principles. Avenel shall return you to Parliament; and the rest is with luck and energy. And now, I'll not detain you longer," said Levy, rising and ringing the bell. The servant entered.

"Is my carriage here?"

"Yes, Baron."

"Can I set you down anywhere?"

"No, thank you, I prefer walking."

"Adieu, then. And mind you remember the *soirée dansante* at Mrs Avenel's." Randal mechanically shook the hand extended to him, and went down the stairs.

The fresh frosty air roused his intellectual faculties, which Levy's ominous words had almost paralysed.

And the first thing the clever schemer said to himself was this—"But what can be the man's motive in what he said to me?"

The next was—"Egerton ruined! What am I, then?"

And the third was—"And that fair remnant of the old Leslie property? £20,000 down—how to get the sum? Why should Levy have spoken to me of this?"

And lastly, the soliloquy rounded back—"The man's motives! His motives!"

Meanwhile, the Baron threw himself into his chariot—the most comfortable easy chariot you can possibly conceive—single man's chariot—perfect taste—no married man ever had such a chariot; and in a few minutes he was at ——'s hotel, and in the presence of Giulio Franzini, Count di Peschiera.

"*Mon cher*," said the Baron, in very good French, and in a tone of the most familiar equality with the descendant of the princes and heroes of grand medieval Italy—"*Mon cher*, give me one of your excellent cigars. I think I have put all matters in train."

"You have found out—"

"No; not so fast yet," said the Baron, lighting the cigar extended to him. "But you said that you should be perfectly contented if it only cost you £20,000 to marry off your sister (to whom that sum is legally due), and to marry yourself to the heiress."

"I did, indeed."

"Then I have no doubt I shall manage both objects for that sum, if Randal Leslie really knows where the young lady is, and can assist you. Most promising able man is Randal Leslie—but innocent as a babe just born."

"Ha, ha! Innocent? *Que diable!*"

"Innocent as this cigar, *mon cher*—strong certainly, but smoked very easily. *Soyez tranquille!*"

CHAPTER XV.

Who has not seen, who not admired, that noble picture by Daniel Maclise, which refreshes the immortal name of my ancestor Caxton! For myself, while with national pride I heard the admiring murmurs of the foreigners who grouped around it (nothing, indeed, of which our nation may be more proud had they seen in the Crystal Palace)—heard, with no less a pride in the generous nature of fellow-artists, the warm applause of living and deathless masters, sanctioning the enthusiasm of the popular crowd;—what struck me more than the precision of drawing, for which the artist has been always renowned, and the just, though gorgeous affluence of colour which he has more recently acquired, was the profound depth of conception, out of which this great work had so elaborately arisen. That monk, with his scowl towards the printer and his back on the Bible over which *his form casts a shadow*—the whole transition between the medieval Christianity of cell and cloister, and the modern Christianity that rejoices in the daylight, is depicted there, in the shadow that obscures the Book—in the scowl that is fixed upon the Book-diffuser;—that sombre, musing face of

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, with the beauty of Napoleon, darkened to the expression of a Fiend, looking far and anxiously into futurity, as if foreseeing there what antagonism was about to be created to the schemes of secret crime and unrelenting force;—the chivalrous head of the accomplished Rivers, seen but in profile under his helmet, as if the age when Chivalry must defend its noble attributes, in steel, was already half passed away: and, not least grand of all, the rude thews and sinews of the artisan forced into service on the type, and the ray of intellect, fierce and menacing revolutions yet to be, struggling through his rugged features, and across his low knitted brow;—all this, which showed how deeply the idea of the discovery, in its good and in its evil, its saving light and its perilous storms, had sunk into the artist's soul, charmed me as effecting the exact union between sentiment and execution, which is the true and rare consummation of the Ideal in Art. But observe, while in these personages of the group are depicted the deeper and graver agencies implicated in the bright but terrible invention—observe how little the light epicures of the hour heed the scowl of the monk, or the restless gesture of Richard, or the troubled gleam in the eyes of the artisan—King Edward, handsome *Poco curante*, delighted in the surprise of a child, with a new toy; and Clarence, with his curious, yet careless, glance—all the while Caxton himself, calm, serene, untroubled, intent solely upon the manifestation of his discovery, and no doubt supremely indifferent whether the first proofs of it shall be dedicated to a Rivers or an Edward, a Richard or a Henry, Plantagenet or Tudor—'tis all the same to that comely, gentle-looking man. So is it ever with your Abstract Science!—not a jot cares its passionless logic for the woe or weal of a generation or two. The stream, once emerged from its source, passes on into the great Intellectual Sea, smiling over the wretch that it drowns, or under the keel of the ship which it serves as a slave.

Now, when about to commence the present chapter on the Varieties of Life, this masterpiece of thoughtful art forced itself on my recollection, and illustrated what I designed to convey. In the surface of every age, it is often that which but amuses, for the moment, the ordinary children of pleasant existence, the Edwards and the Clarences (be they kings and dukes, or simplest of simple subjects), which afterwards towers out as the great serious epoch of the time. When we look back upon human records, how the eye settles upon WRITERS as the main land-marks of the past! We talk of the age of Augustus, of Elizabeth, of Louis XIV., of Anne, as the notable eras of the world. Why? Because it is their writers who have made them so. Intervals between one age of authors and another lie unnoticed, as the flats and common lands of uncultured history. And yet, strange to say, when these authors are living amongst us, they occupy a very small portion of our thoughts, and fill up but desultory interstices in the bitumen and tufa wherefrom we build up the Babylon of our lives! So it is, and perhaps so it should be, whether it pleases the conceit of penmen or not. Life is meant to be active; and books, though they give the action to future generations, administer but to the holiday of the present.

And so, with this long preface, I turn suddenly from the Randals and the Egertons, and the Levys, Avenels, and Peschieras—from the plots and passions of practical life, and drop the reader suddenly into one of those obscure retreats wherein Thought weaves, from unnoticed moments, a new link to the chain that unites the ages.

Within a small room, the single window of which opened on a fanciful and fairy-like garden, that has been before described, sat a young man alone. He had been writing, the ink was not dry on his manuscript, but his thoughts had been suddenly interrupted from his work, and his eyes, now lifted from the letter which had occasioned that interruption, sparkled with delight. "He will come," exclaimed the young man; "come here—to the home which I owe to him. I have not been unworthy of his friendship. And she" —his breast heaved, but the joy faded from his face. "Oh, strange, strange, that I feel sad at the thought to see her again. See *her*—Ah no! my own comforting Helen—my own Child-angel! *Her* I can never see again! The grown woman—that is not my Helen. And yet—and yet," he resumed after a pause, "if ever she read the pages in which thought flowed and trembled under her distant starry light—if ever she see how her image has rested with me, and feel that, while others believe that I invent, I have but remembered—will she not, for a moment, be my own Helen again! Again, in heart and in fancy, stand by my side on the desolate bridge—hand in hand—orphans both, as we stood in the days so sorrowful, yet, as I recall them, so sweet.—Helen in England, it is a dream!"

He rose, half-consciously, and went to the window. The fountain played merrily before his eyes, and the birds in the aviary carolled loud to his ear. "And in this house," he murmured, "I saw her last! And there, where the fountain now throws its spray on high—there her benefactor and mine told me that I was to lose *her*, that I might win fame. Alas!"

At this time a woman, whose dress was somewhat above her mien and air, which, though not without a certain respectability, were very homely, entered the room; and, seeing the young man standing thus thoughtfully by the window, paused. She was used to his habits, and, since his success in life, had learned to respect them. So she did not disturb his reverie, but began softly to arrange the room—dusting, with the corner of her apron, the various articles of furniture, putting a stray chair or two in its right place, but not touching a single paper. Virtuous woman, and rare as virtuous!

The young man turned at last, with a deep yet not altogether painful sigh—

"My dear mother, good-day to you. Ah, you do well to make the room look its best. Happy news! I expect a visitor!"

"Dear me, Leonard, will he want lunch—or what?"

"Nay, I think not, mother. It is he to whom we owe all—'*Hæc otia fecit.*' Pardon my Latin; it is Lord L'Estrange."

The face of Mrs Fairfield (the reader has long since divined the name) changed instantly, and betrayed a nervous twitch of all the muscles, which gave her a family likeness to old Mrs Avenel.

"Do not be alarmed, mother. He is the kindest—"

"Don't talk so; I can't bear it!" cried Mrs Fairfield.

"No wonder you are affected by the recollection of all his benefits. But when once you have seen him, you will find yourself ever after at your ease. And so, pray smile and look as good as you are; for I am proud of your open, honest look when you are pleased, mother. And he must see your heart in your face, as I do."

With this, Leonard put his arm round the widow's neck and kissed her. She clung to him fondly for a moment, and he felt her tremble from head to foot. Then she broke from his embrace, and hurried out of the room. Leonard thought perhaps she had gone to improve her dress, or to carry her housewife energies to the decoration of the other rooms; for "the house" was Mrs Fairfield's hobby and passion; and now that she worked no more, save for her amusement, it was her main occupation. The hours she contrived to spend daily in bustling about those little rooms, and leaving everything therein to all appearance precisely the same, were among the marvels in life which the genius of Leonard had never comprehended. But she was always so delighted when Mr Norreys or some rare visitor came, and said (Mr Norreys never failed to do so), "How neatly all is kept here! What could Leonard do without you, Mrs Fairfield?"

And, to Norreys' infinite amusement, Mrs Fairfield always returned the same answer. "'Deed, sir, and thank you kindly, but 'tis my belief that the drawin'-room would be awful dusty."

Once more left alone, Leonard's mind returned to the state of reverie, and his face assumed the expression that had now become to it habitual. Thus seen, he was changed much since we last beheld him. His cheek was more pale and thin, his lips more firmly compressed, his eye more fixed and abstract. You could detect, if I may borrow a touching French expression, that "sorrow had passed by there." But the melancholy on his countenance was ineffably sweet and serene, and on his ample forehead there was that power, so rarely seen in early youth—the power that has conquered, and betrays its conquests but in calm. The period of doubt, of struggle, of defiance, was gone perhaps for ever; genius and soul were reconciled to human life. It was a face most lovable; so gentle and peaceful in its character. No want of fire; on the contrary, the fire was so clear and so steadfast that it conveyed but the impression of light. The candour of boyhood, the simplicity of the villager, were still there—refined by intelligence, but intelligence that seemed to have traversed through knowledge—not with the footstep, but the wing—unsullied by the mire—tending towards the star—seeking through the various grades of Being but the lovelier forms of truth and goodness ; at home as should be the Art that consummates the Beautiful—

> "In den heitern Regionen
> Wo die reinen Formen wohnen." *

From this reverie Leonard did not seek to rouse himself, till the bell at the garden-gate rang loud and shrill; and then, starting up and hurrying into the hall, his hand was grasped in Harley's.

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* At home—"In the serene regions
Where dwell the pure forms."

CHAPTER XVI.

A FULL and happy hour passed away in Harley's questions and Leonard's answers; the dialogue that naturally ensued between the two, on the first interview after an absence of years so eventful to the younger man.

The history of Leonard during this interval was almost solely internal; the struggle of intellect with its own difficulties — the wanderings of imagination through its own adventurous worlds.

The first aim of Norreys, in preparing the mind of his pupil for its vocation, had been to establish the equilibrium of its powers, to calm into harmony the elements rudely shaken by the trials and passions of the old, hard, outer life.

The theory of Norreys was briefly this: The education of a superior human being is but the development of ideas in one for the benefit of others. To this end, attention should be directed—1st, To the value of the ideas collected; 2dly, To their discipline; 3dly, To their expression. For the first, acquirement is necessary; for the second, discipline; for the third, art. The first comprehends knowledge, purely intellectual, whether derived from observation, memory, reflection, books or men, Aristotle or Fleet Street. The second demands *training*, not only intellectual, but moral; the purifying and exaltation of motives; the formation of habits: in which method is but a part of a divine and harmonious symmetry—an union of intellect and conscience. Ideas of value, stored by the first process; marshalled into force, and placed under guidance, by the second; it is the result of the third, to place them before the world in the most attractive or commanding form. This may be done by actions no less than words; but the adaptation of means to end, the passage of ideas from the brain of one man into the lives and souls of all, no less in action than in books, requires study. Action has its art as well as literature. Here Norreys had but to deal with the calling of the scholar, the formation of the writer, and so to guide the perceptions towards those varieties in the sublime and beautiful, the just combination of which is at once CREATION. Man himself is but a combination of elements. He who combines in nature, creates in art.

Such, very succinctly and inadequately expressed, was the system upon which Norreys proceeded to regulate and perfect the great native powers of his pupil; and though the reader may perhaps say that no system laid down by another can either form genius or dictate to its results, yet probably nine-tenths at least of those in whom we recognise the luminaries of our race, have passed, unconsciously to themselves (for self-education is rarely conscious of its phases), through each of these processes. And no one who pauses to reflect will deny that, according to this theory, illustrated by a man of vast experience, profound knowledge, and exquisite taste, the struggles of genius would be infinitely lessened, its vision cleared and strengthened, and the distance between effort and success notably abridged.

Norreys, however, was far too deep a reasoner to fall into the error of modern teachers, who suppose that education can dispense with labour. No mind becomes muscular without rude and early exercise. Labour should be strenuous, but in right directions. All that we can do for it is to save the waste of time in blundering into needless toils.

The master had thus first employed his neophyte in arranging and compiling materials for a great critical work in which Norreys himself was engaged. In this stage of scholastic preparation, Leonard was necessarily led to the acquisition of languages, for which he had great aptitude—the foundations of a large and comprehensive erudition were solidly constructed. He traced by the ploughshare the walls of the destined city. Habits of accuracy and of generalisation became formed insensibly ; and that precious faculty which seizes, amidst accumulated materials, those that serve the object for which they are explored—(that faculty which quadruples all force, by concentrating it on one point) —once roused into action, gave purpose to every toil and quickness to each perception. But Norreys did not confine his pupil solely to the mute world of a library; he introduced him to some of the first minds in arts, science, and letters—and active life. "These," said he, "are the living ideas of the present, out of which books for the future will be written: study them; and here, as in the volumes of the past, diligently amass and deliberately compile."

By degrees Norreys led on that young, ardent mind from the selection of ideas to their æsthetic analysis—from compilation to criticism; but criticism severe, close, and logical—a reason for each word of praise or of blame. Led in this stage of his career to examine into the laws of beauty, a new light broke upon his mind; from amidst the masses of marble he had piled around him, rose the vision of the statue.

And so, suddenly one day Norreys said to him, "I need a compiler no longer—maintain yourself by your own creations." And Leonard wrote, and a work flowered up from the seed deep buried, and the soil well cleared to the rays of the sun and the healthful influence of expanded air.

That first work did not penetrate to a very wide circle of readers, not from any perceptible fault of its own—there is luck in these things; the first anonymous work of an original genius is rarely at once eminently successful. But the more experienced recognised the promise of the book. Publishers, who have an instinct in the discovery of available talent, which often forestalls the appreciation of the public, volunteered liberal offers. "Be fully successful this time," said Norreys; "think not of models nor of style. Strike at once at the common human heart—throw away the corks—swim out boldly. One word more—never write a page till you have walked from your room to Temple Bar, and, mingling with men, and reading the human face, learn why great poets have mostly passed their lives in cities."

Thus Leonard wrote again, and woke one morning to find himself famous. So far as the chances of all professions dependent on health will permit, present independence, and, with foresight and economy, the prospects of future competence, were secured.

"And, indeed," said Leonard, concluding a longer but a simpler narrative than is here told—"indeed, there is some chance that I may obtain at once a sum that will leave me free for the rest of my life to select my own subjects and write without care for remuneration. This is what I call the true (and, perhaps, alas! the rare) independence of him who devotes himself to letters. Norreys, having seen my boyish plan for the improvement of certain machinery in the steam-engine, insisted on my giving much time to mechanics. The study that once pleased me so greatly, now seemed dull; but I went into it with good heart; and the result is, that I have improved so far on my original idea, that my scheme has met the approbation of one of our most scientific engineers; and I am assured that the patent for it will be purchased of me upon terms which I am ashamed to name to you, so disproportioned do they seem to the value of so simple a discovery. Meanwhile I am already rich enough to have realised the two dreams of my heart—to make a home in the cottage where I had last seen you and Helen—I mean Miss Digby; and to invite to that home her who had sheltered my infancy."

"Your mother, where is she? Let me see her."

Leonard ran out to call the widow, but, to his surprise and vexation, learned that she had quitted the house before L'Estrange arrived.

He came back perplexed how to explain what seemed ungracious and ungrateful, and spoke with hesitating lip and flushed cheek of the widow's natural timidity and sense of her own homely station. "And so overpowered is she," added Leonard, "by the recollection of all that we owe to you, that she never hears your name without agitation or tears, and trembled like a leaf at the thought of seeing you."

"Ha!" said Harley, with visible emotion. "Is it so?" And he bent down, shading his face with his hand. "And," he renewed, after a pause, but not looking up—"and you ascribe this fear of seeing me, this agitation at my name, solely to an exaggerated sense of—of the circumstances attending my acquaintance with yourself?"

"And, perhaps, to a sort of shame that the mother of one you have made her proud of is but a peasant."

"That is all," said Harley, earnestly, now looking up and fixing his eyes, in which stood tears, upon Leonard's ingenuous brow.

"Oh, my dear lord, what else can it be? Do not judge her harshly."

L'Estrange arose abruptly, pressed Leonard's hand, muttered something not audible, and then, drawing his young friend's arm in his, led him into the garden, and turned the conversation back to its former topics.

Leonard's heart yearned to ask after Helen, and yet something withheld him from doing so, till, seeing Harley did not volunteer to speak of her, he could not resist his impulse. "And Helen—Miss Digby—is she much changed?"

"Changed, no—yes; very much."

"Very much!" Leonard sighed.

"I shall see her again?"

"Certainly," said Harley, in a tone of surprise. "How can you doubt it? And I reserve to you the pleasure of saying that you are renowned. You blush; well, I will say that for you. But you shall give her your books."

"She has not yet read them, then?—not the last? The first was not worthy of her attention," said Leonard, disappointed.

"She has only just arrived in England; and though your books reached me in Germany, she was not then with me. When I have settled some business that will take me from town, I shall present you to her and my mother." There was a certain embarrassment in Harley's voice as he spoke; and, turning round abruptly, he exclaimed, "But you have shown poetry even here. I could not have conceived that so much beauty could be drawn from what appeared to me the most commonplace of all suburban gardens. Why, surely, where that charming fountain now plays stood the rude bench in which I read your verses."

"It is true; I wished to unite all together my happiest associations. I think I told you, my lord, in one of my letters, that I had owed a very happy, yet very struggling time in my boyhood to the singular kindness and generous instructions of a foreigner whom I served. This fountain is copied from one that I made in his garden, and by the margin of which many a summer day I have sat and dreamt of fame and knowledge."

"True, you told me of that; and your foreigner will be pleased to hear of your success, and no less so of your grateful recollections. By the way, you did not mention his name."

"Riccabocca."

"Riccabocca! My own dear and noble friend!—is it possible? One of my reasons for returning to England is connected with him. You shall go down with me and see him. I meant to start this evening."

"My dear lord," said Leonard, "I think that you may spare yourself so long a journey. I have reason to suspect that Signor Riccabocca is my nearest neighbour. Two days ago I was in the garden, when, suddenly lifting my eyes to yon hillock, I perceived the form of a man seated amongst the brushwood; and though I could not see his features, there was something in the very outline of his figure and his peculiar posture that irresistibly reminded me of Riccabocca.

I hastened out of the garden and ascended the hill, but he was gone. My suspicions were so strong, that I caused inquiry to be made at the different shops scattered about, and learned that a family, consisting of a gentleman, his wife, and daughter, had lately come to live in a house that you must have passed in your way hither, standing a little back from the road, surrounded by high walls; and though they were said to be English, yet from the description given to me of the gentleman's person by one who had noticed it, by the fact of a foreign servant in their employ, and by the very name 'Richmouth,' assigned to the new comers, I can scarcely doubt that it is the family you seek."

"And you have not called to ascertain?"

"Pardon me, but the family so evidently shunning observation (no one but the master himself ever seen without the walls), the adoption of another name too —led me to infer that Signor Riccabocca has some strong motive for concealment; and now, with my improved knowledge of life, and recalling all the past, I cannot but suppose that Riccabocca was not what he appeared. Hence, I have hesitated on formally obtruding myself upon his secrets, whatever they be, and have rather watched for some chance occasion to meet him in his walks."

"You did right, my dear Leonard; but my reasons for seeing my old friend forbid all scruples of delicacy, and I will go at once to his house."

"You will tell me, my lord, if I am right."

"I hope to be allowed to do so. Pray, stay at home till I return. And now, ere I go, one question more: You indulge conjectures as to Riccabocca because he has changed his name—why have you dropped your own?"

"I wished to have no name," said Leonard, colouring deeply, "but that which I could make myself."

"Proud poet, this I can comprehend. But from what reason did you assume the strange and fantastic name of Oran?"

The flush on Leonard's face became deeper. "My lord," said he, in a low voice, "it is a childish fancy of mine; it is an anagram."

"Ah!"

"At a time when my cravings after knowledge were likely much to mislead, and perhaps undo me, I chanced on some poems that suddenly affected my whole mind, and led me up into purer air; and I was told that these poems were written in youth, by one who had beauty and genius—one who was in her grave—a relation of my own, and her familiar name was Nora—"

"Ah!" again ejaculated Lord L'Estrange, and his arm pressed heavily upon Leonard's.

"So, somehow or other," continued the young author, falteringly, "I wished that if ever I won to a poet's fame, it might be, to my own heart at least, associated with this name of Nora—with her whom death had robbed of the fame that she might otherwise have won —with her who—"

He paused, greatly agitated.

Harley was no less so. But, as if by a sudden impulse, the soldier bent down his manly head and kissed the poet's brow ; then he hastened to the gate, flung himself on his horse, and rode away.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lord L'Estrange did not proceed at once to Riccabocca's house. He was under the influence of a remembrance too deep and too strong to yield easily to the lukewarm claim of friendship. He rode fast and far; and impossible it would be to define the feelings that passed through a mind so acutely sensible and so rootedly tenacious of all affections. When recalling his duty to the Italian, he once more struck into the road to Norwood, the slow pace of his horse was significant of his own exhausted spirits; a deep dejection had succeeded to feverish excitement. "Vain task," he murmured, "to wean myself from the dead! Yet I am now betrothed to another; and she, with all her virtues, is not the one to——" He stopped short in generous self-rebuke. "Too late to think of that! Now, all that should remain to me is to insure the happiness of the life to which I have pledged my own. But——" He sighed as he so murmured. On reaching the vicinity of Riccabocca's house, he put up his horse at a little inn, and proceeded on foot across the heathland towards the dull square building, which Leonard's description had sufficed to indicate as the exile's new home. It was long before any one answered his summons at the gate. Not till he had thrice rung did he hear a heavy step on the gravel walk within; then the wicket within the gate was partially drawn aside, a dark eye gleamed out, and a voice in imperfect English asked who was there.

"Lord L'Estrange; and if I am right as to the person I seek, that name will at once admit me."

The door flew open as did that of the mystic cavern at the sound of "Open, Sesame;" and Giacomo, almost weeping with joyous emotion, exclaimed, in Italian, "The good Lord! Holy San Giacomo! thou hast heard me at last! We are safe now." And dropping the blunderbuss with which he had taken the precaution to arm himself, he lifted Harley's hand to his lips, in the affectionate greeting familiar to his countrymen.

"And the Padrone?" asked Harley, as he entered the jealous precincts.

"Oh, he is just gone out; but he will not be long. You will wait for him?"

"Certainly. What lady is that I see at the far end of the garden?"

"Bless her, it is our Signorina. I will run and tell her you are come."

"That I am come; but she cannot know me even by name."

"Ah, Excellency, can you think so? Many and many a time has she talked to me of you, and I have heard her pray to the holy Madonna to bless you, and in a voice so sweet——"

"Stay, I will present myself to her. Go into the house, and we will wait without for the Padrone. Nay, I need the air, my friend." Harley, as he said this, broke from Giacomo, and approached Violante.

The poor child, in her solitary walk in the obscurer parts of the dull garden, had escaped the eye of Giacomo when he had gone forth to answer the bell; and she, unconscious of the fears of which she was the object, had felt something of youthful curiosity at the summons at the gate, and the sight of a stranger in close and friendly confidence with the unsocial Giacomo.

As Harley now neared her with that singular grace of movement which belonged to him, a thrill shot through her heart—she knew not why. She did not recognise his likeness to the sketch taken by her father from his recollections of Harley's early youth. She did not guess who he was; and yet she felt herself colour, and, naturally fearless though she was, turned away with a vague alarm.

"Pardon my want of ceremony, Signorina," said Harley, in Italian; "but I am so old a friend of your father's that I cannot feel as a stranger to yourself."

Then Violante lifted to him her dark eyes, so intelligent and so innocent—eyes full of surprise, but not displeased surprise. And Harley himself stood amazed, and almost abashed, by the rich and marvellous beauty that beamed upon him. "My father's friend," she said, hesitatingly, "and I never to have seen you!"

"Ah, Signorina," said Harley (and something of its native humour, half arch, half sad, played round his lip), "you are mistaken there; you have seen me before, and you received me much more kindly then ——"

"Signor!" said Violante, more and more surprised, and with a yet richer colour on her cheeks.

Harley, who had now recovered from the first effect of her beauty, and who regarded her as men of his years and character are apt to regard ladies in their teens, as more child than woman, suffered himself to be amused by her perplexity for it was in his nature, that the graver and more mournful he felt at heart, the more he sought to give play and whim to his spirits.

"Indeed, Signorina," said he, demurely, "you insisted then on placing one of those fair hands in mine; the other (forgive me the fidelity of my recollections) was affectionately thrown around my neck."

"Signor!" again exclaimed Violante; but this time there was anger in her voice, as well as surprise, and nothing could be more charming than her look of pride and resentment.

Harley smiled again, but with so much kindly sweetness that the anger vanished at once, or rather Violante felt angry with herself that she was no longer angry with him. But she had looked so beautiful in her anger, that Harley wished, perhaps, to see her angry again. So, composing his lips from their propitiatory smile, he resumed, gravely—

"Your flatterers will tell you, Signorina, that you are much improved since then, but I liked you better as you were; not but what I hope to return some day what you then so generously pressed upon me."

"Pressed upon you!—I? Signor, you are under some strange mistake."

"Alas! no; but the female heart is so capricious and fickle! You pressed it upon me, I assure you. I own that I was not loth to accept it."

"Pressed it! Pressed what?"

"Your kiss, my child," said Harley; and then added, with a serious tenderness, "And I again say that I hope to return it some day—when I see you, by the side of father and of husband, in your native land—the fairest bride on whom the skies of Italy ever smiled! And now, pardon a hermit and a soldier for his rude jests, and give your hand, in token of that pardon,—to Harley L'Estrange."

Violante, who at the first words of his address had recoiled, with a vague belief that the stranger was out of his mind, sprang forward as it closed, and, in all the vivid enthusiasm of her nature, pressed the hand held out to her with both her own. "Harley L'Estrange—the preserver of my father's life!" she cried; and her eyes were fixed on his with such evident gratitude and reverence, that Harley felt at once confused and delighted. She did not think at that instant of the hero of her dreams—she thought but of him who had saved her father. But as his eyes sank before her own, and his head, uncovered, bowed over the hand he held, she recognised the likeness to the features on which she had so often gazed. The first bloom of youth was gone, but enough of youth still remained to soften the lapse of years, and to leave to manhood the attractions which charm the eye. Instinctively she withdrew her hands from his clasp, and, in her turn, looked down.

In this pause of embarrassment to both, Riccabocca let himself into the garden by his own latch-key, and, startled to see a man by the side of Violante, sprang forward with an abrupt and angry cry. Harley heard, and turned.

As if restored to courage and self-possession by the sense of her father's presence, Violante again took the hand of the visitor. "Father," she said simply, "it is he—*he* is come at last." And then, retiring a few steps, she contemplated them both; and her face was radiant with happiness—as if something, long silently missed and looked for, was as silently found, and life had no more a want, nor the heart a void.

BOOK X.

INITIAL CHAPTER.

UPON THIS FACT—THAT THE WORLD IS STILL MUCH THE SAME AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN.

It is observed by a very pleasant writer—read nowadays only by the brave pertinacious few who still struggle hard to rescue from the House of Pluto the souls of departed authors, jostled and chased as those souls are by the noisy footsteps of the living—it is observed by the admirable Charron, that "judgment and wisdom is not only the best, but the happiest portion God Almighty hath distributed amongst men; for though this distribution be made with a very uneven hand, yet nobody thinks himself stinted or ill-dealt with, but he that hath never so little is contented in *this* respect." *

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* Translation of *Charron on Wisdom.* By G. Stanhope, D.D., late Dean of Canterbury (1729). A translation remarkable for

And, certainly, the present narrative may serve in notable illustration of the remark so drily made by the witty and wise preacher. For whether our friend Riccabocca deduce theories for daily life from the great folio of Machiavelli; or that promising young gentleman, Mr Randal Leslie, interpret the power of knowledge into the art of being too knowing for dull honest folks to cope with him; or acute Dick Avenel push his way up the social ascent with a blow for those before, and a kick for those behind him, after the approved fashion of your strong New Man; or Baron Levy—that cynical impersonation of Gold—compare himself to the Magnetic Rock in the Arabian tale, to which the nails in every ship that approaches the influence of the loadstone fly from the planks, and a shipwreck per day adds its waifs to the Rock: questionless at least it is, that each of those personages believes that Providence has bestowed on him an elder son's inheritance of wisdom. Nor, were we to glance towards the obscurer paths of life, should we find good Parson Dale deem himself worse off than the rest of the world in this precious commodity—as, indeed, he has signally evinced of late in that shrewd guess of his touching Professor Moss;—even plain Squire Hazeldean takes it for granted that he could teach Audley Egerton a thing or two worth knowing in politics; Mr

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ease, vigour, and (despite that contempt for the strict rules of grammar, which was common enough amongst writers at the commencement of the last century) for the idiomatic raciness of its English.

Stirn thinks that there is no branch of useful lore on which he could not instruct the Squire; while Sprott, the tinker, with his bag full of tracts and lucifer-matches, regards the whole framework of modern society, from a rick to a constitution, with the profound disdain of a revolutionary philosopher. Considering that every individual thus brings into the stock of the world so vast a share of intelligence, it cannot but excite our wonder to find that Oxenstiern is popularly held to be right when he said, "See, my son, how little wisdom it requires to govern States;"—that is, Men! That so many millions of persons, each with a profound assurance that he is possessed of an exalted sagacity, should concur in the ascendancy of a few inferior intellects, according to a few stupid, prosy, matter-of-fact rules as old as the hills, is a phenomenon very discreditable to the spirit and energy of the aggregate human species! It creates no surprise that one sensible watch-dog should control the movements of a flock of silly grass-eating sheep; but that two or three silly grass-eating sheep should give the law to whole flocks of such mighty sensible watch-dogs—*Diavolo!* Dr Riccabocca, explain *that* if you can! And wonderfully strange it is, that notwithstanding all the march of enlightenment, notwithstanding our progressive discoveries in the laws of nature—our railways, steam-engines, animal magnetism, and electro-biology—we have never made any improvement that is generally acknowledged, since Men ceased to be troglodytes and nomads, in the old-fashioned gamut of flats and sharps, which attunes into irregular social jog-trot all the generations that pass from the cradle to the grave; still, "*the desire for something we have not*" impels all the energies that keep us in movement, for good or for ill, according to the checks or the directions of each favourite desire.

A friend of mine once said to a *millionnaire*, whom he saw for ever engaged in making money, which he never seemed to have any pleasure in spending, "Pray, Mr ——, will you answer me one question: You are said to have two millions, and you spend £600 a-year. In order to rest and enjoy, what will content you?"

"A little more," answered the *millionnaire*. That "little more" is the mainspring of civilisation. Nobody ever gets it!

"Philus," saith a Latin writer, "was not so rich as Lælius; Lælius was not so rich as Scipio; Scipio was not so rich as Crassus; and Crassus was not so rich as he wished to be!" If John Bull were once contented, Manchester might shut up its mills. It is the "little more" that makes a mere trifle of the National Debt!—Long life to it!

Still, mend our law-books as we will, one is forced to confess that knaves are often seen in fine linen, and honest men in the most shabby old rags; and still, notwithstanding the exceptions, knavery is a very hazardous game; and honesty, on the whole, by far the best policy. Still, most of the Ten Commandments remain at the core of all the Pandects and Institutes that keep our hands off our neighbours' throats, wives, and pockets; still, every year shows that the Parson's maxim—*non quieta movere*—is as prudent for the health of communities as when Apollo recommended his votaries not to rake up a fever by stirring the Lake Camarina; still people, thank Heaven, decline to reside in parallelograms; and the surest token that we live under a free government is, when we are governed by persons whom we have a full right to imply, by our censure and ridicule, are blockheads compared to ourselves! Stop that delightful privilege, and, by Jove! sir, there is neither pleasure nor honour in being governed at all! You might as well be—a Frenchman!

CHAPTER II.

The Italian and his friend are closeted together.

"And why have you left your home in ——shire? and why this new change of name?"

"Peschiera is in England."

"I know it."

"And bent on discovering me; and, it is said, of stealing from me my child."

"He has had the assurance to lay wagers that he will win the hand of your heiress. I know that too; and therefore I have come to England—first to baffle his design—for I do not think your fears altogether exaggerated—and next to learn from you how to follow up a clue which, unless I am too sanguine, may lead to his ruin and your unconditional restoration. Listen to me. You are aware that, after the skirmish with Peschiera's armed hirelings sent in search of you, I received a polite message from the Austrian government, requesting me to leave its Italian domains. Now, as I hold it the obvious duty of any foreigner, admitted to the hospitality of a state, to refrain from all participation in its civil disturbances, so I thought my honour assailed at this intimation, and went at once to Vienna to explain to the Minister there (to whom I was personally known), that though I had, as became man to man, aided to protect a refugee, who had taken shelter under my roof, from the infuriated soldiers at the command of his private foe, I had not only not shared in any attempt at revolt, but dissuaded, as far as I could, my Italian friends from their enterprise; and that because, without discussing its merits, I believed, as a military man and a cool spectator, the enterprise could only terminate in fruitless bloodshed. I was enabled to establish my explanation by satisfactory proof; and my acquaintance with the Minister assumed something of the character of friendship. I was then in a position to advocate your cause, and to state your original reluctance to enter into the plots of the insurgents. I admitted freely that you had such natural desire for the independence of your native land, that, had the standard of Italy been boldly hoisted by its legitimate chiefs, or at the common uprising of its whole people, you would have been found in the van, amidst the ranks of your countrymen; but I maintained that you would never have shared in a conspiracy frantic in itself, and defiled by the lawless schemes and sordid ambition of its main projectors, had you not been betrayed and decoyed into it by the misrepresentations and domestic treachery of your kinsman—the very man who denounced you. Unfortunately, of this statement I had no proof but your own word. I made, however, so far an impression in your favour, and, it may be, against the traitor, that your property was not confiscated to the State, nor handed over, upon the plea of your civil death, to your kinsman."

"How!—I do not understand. Peschiera has the property?"

"He holds the revenues but of one-half upon pleasure, and they would be withdrawn, could I succeed in establishing the case that exists against him. I was forbidden before to mention this to you; the Minister, not inexcusably, submitted you to the probation of unconditional exile. Your grace might depend upon your own forbearance from further conspiracies—forgive the word. I need not say I was permitted to return to Lombardy. I found, on my arrival, that—that your unhappy wife had been to my house, and exhibited great despair at hearing of my departure."

Riccabocca knit his dark brows, and breathed hard.

"I did not judge it necessary to acquaint you with this circumstance, nor did it much affect me. I believed in her guilt—and what could now avail her remorse, if remorse she felt? Shortly afterwards, I heard that she was no more."

"Yes," muttered Riccabocca, "she died in the same year that I left Italy. It must be a strong reason that can excuse a friend for reminding me even that she once lived!"

"I come at once to that reason," said L'Estrange, gently. "This autumn I was roaming through Switzerland, and, in one of my pedestrian excursions amidst the mountains, I met with an accident, which confined me for some days to a sofa at a little inn in an obscure village. My hostess was an Italian; and, as I had left my servant at a town at some distance, I required her attention till I could write to him to come to me. I was thankful for her cares, and amused by her Italian babble. We became very good friends. She told me she had been servant to a lady of great rank, who had died in Switzerland; and that, being enriched by the generosity of her mistress, she had married a Swiss innkeeper, and his people had become hers. My servant arrived, and my hostess learned my name, which she did not know before. She came into my room greatly agitated. In brief, this woman had been servant to your wife. She had accompanied her to my villa, and known of her anxiety to see me, as your friend. The government had assigned to your wife your palace at Milan, with a competent income. She had refused to accept of either. Failing to see me, she had set off towards England, resolved upon seeing yourself; for the journals had stated that to England you had escaped."

"She dared!—shameless! And see, but a moment before, I had forgotten all but her grave in a foreign soil—and these tears had forgiven her," murmured the Italian.

"Let them forgive her still," said Harley, with all his exquisite sweetness of look and tone. "I resume. On entering Switzerland, your wife's health, which you know was always delicate, gave way. To fatigue and anxiety succeeded fever, and delirium ensued. She had taken with her but this one female attendant—the sole one she could trust—on leaving home. She suspected Peschiera to have bribed her household. In the presence of this woman she raved of her innocence—in accents of terror and aversion, denounced your kinsman—and called on you to vindicate her name and your own."

"Ravings indeed! Poor Paulina!" groaned Riccabocca, covering his face with both hands.

"But in her delirium there were lucid intervals. In one of these she rose, in spite of all her servant could do to restrain her, took from her desk several letters, and reading them over, exclaimed piteously, 'But how to get them to him?—whom to trust? And his friend is gone!' Then an idea seemed suddenly to flash upon her, for she uttered a joyous exclamation, sat down, and wrote long and rapidly; enclosed what she wrote with all the letters, in one packet, which she sealed carefully, and bade her servant carry to the post, with many injunctions to take it with her own hand, and pay the charge on it. 'For oh!' said she (I repeat the words as my informant told them to me)—'for, oh! this is my sole chance to prove to my husband that, though I have erred, I am not the guilty thing he believes me; the sole chance, too, to redeem my error, and restore, perhaps, to my husband his country, to my child her heritage.' The servant took the letter to the post; and when she returned, her lady was asleep, with a smile upon her face. But from that sleep she woke again delirious, and before the next morning her soul had fled." Here Riccabocca lifted one hand from his face and grasped Harley's arm, as if mutely beseeching him to pause. The heart of the man struggled hard with his pride and his philosophy; and it was long before Harley could lead him to regard the worldly prospects which this last communication from his wife might open to his ruined fortunes. Not, indeed, till Riccabocca had persuaded himself, and half-persuaded Harley (for strong, indeed, was all presumption of guilt against the dead) that his wife's protestations of innocence from all but error had been but ravings.

"Be this as it may," said Harley, "there seems every reason to suppose that the letters enclosed were Peschiera's correspondence, and that, if so, these would establish the proof of his influence over your wife, and of his perfidious machinations against yourself. I resolved, before coming hither, to go round by Vienna. There I heard, with dismay, that Peschiera had not only obtained the imperial sanction to demand your daughter's hand, but had boasted to his profligate circle that he should succeed; and he was actually on his road to England. I saw at once that could this design, by any fraud or artifice, be successful with Violante (for of your consent, I need not say, I did not dream), the discovery of the packet, whatever its contents, would be useless: Peschiera's end would be secured. I saw also that his success would suffice for ever to clear his name; for his success must imply your consent (it would be to disgrace your daughter, to assert that she had married without it), and your consent would be his acquittal. I saw, too, with alarm, that to all means for the accomplishment of his project he would be urged by despair; for his debts are great, and his character nothing but new wealth can support. I knew that he was able, bold, determined, and that he had taken with him a large supply of money borrowed upon usury;—in a word, I trembled for you both. I have now seen your daughter, and I tremble no more. Accomplished seducer as Peschiera boasts himself, the first look upon her face so sweet, yet so noble, convinced me that she is proof against a legion of Peschieras. Now, then, return we to this all-important subject—to this packet. It never reached you. Long years have passed since then. Does it exist still? Into whose hands would it have fallen? Try to summon up all your recollections. The servant could not remember the name of the person to whom it was addressed; she only insisted that the name began with a B, that it was directed to England, and that to England she accordingly paid the postage. Whom then, with a name that begins with B, or (in case the servant's memory here misled her) whom did you or your wife know, during your visit to England, with sufficient intimacy to make it probable that she would select such a person for her confidant?"

"I cannot conceive," said Riccabocca, shaking his head. "We came to England shortly after our marriage. Paulina was affected by the climate. She spoke not a word of English, and indeed not even French, as might have been expected from her birth, for her father was poor, and thoroughly Italian. She refused all society. I went, it is true, somewhat into the London world—enough to induce me to shrink from the contrast that my second visit as a beggared refugee would have made to the reception I met with on my first; but I formed no intimate friendships. I recall no one whom she could have written to as intimate with me."

"But," persisted Harley, "think again. Was there no lady well acquainted with Italian, and with whom, perhaps, for that very reason, your wife became familiar?"

"Ah, it is true. There was one old lady of retired habits, but who had been much in Italy. Lady—Lady —I remember—Lady Jane Horton."

"Horton—Lady Jane!" exclaimed Harley; "again! thrice in one day—is this wound never to scar over?" Then, noting Riccabocca's look of surprise, he said, "Excuse me, my friend; I listen to you with renewed interest. Lady Jane was a distant relation of my own; she judged me, perhaps, harshly—and I have some painful associations with her name; but she was a woman of many virtues. Your wife knew her?"

"Not, however, intimately—still, better than any one else in London. But Paulina would not have written to her; she knew that Lady Jane had died shortly after her own departure from England. I myself was summoned back to Italy on pressing business; she was too unwell to journey with me as rapidly as I was obliged to travel; indeed, illness detained her several weeks in England. In this interval she might have made acquaintances. Ah, now I see; I guess. You say the name began with B. Paulina, in my absence, engaged a companion—a Mrs Bertram. This lady accompanied her abroad. Paulina became excessively attached to her, she knew Italian so well. Mrs Bertram left her on the road, and returned to England, for some private affairs of her own. I forget why or wherefore; if, indeed, I ever asked or learned. Paulina missed her sadly, often talked of her, wondered why she never heard from her. No doubt it was to this Mrs Bertram that she wrote!"

"And you don't know the lady's friends, or address?"

"No."

"Nor who recommended her to your wife?"

"No."

"Probably Lady Jane Horton?"

"It may be so. Very likely."

"I will follow up this track, slight as it is."

"But if Mrs Bertram received the communication, how comes it that it never reached myself—O, fool that I am, how should it! I, who guarded so carefully my incognito!"

"True. This your wife could not foresee: she would naturally imagine that your residence in England would be easily discovered. But many years must have passed since your wife lost sight of this Mrs Bertram, if their acquaintance was made so soon after your marriage; and now it is a long time to retrace—before even your Violante was born."

"Alas! yes. I lost two fair sons in the interval. Violante was born to me as the child of sorrow."

"And to make sorrow lovely! how beautiful she is!"

The father smiled proudly.

"Where, in the loftiest houses of Europe, find a husband worthy of such a prize?"

"You forget that I am still an exile—she still dowerless. You forget that I am pursued by Peschiera; that I would rather see her a beggar's wife—than—Pah, the very thought maddens me, it is so foul. *Corpo di Bacco!* I have been glad to find her a husband already."

"Already! Then that young man spoke truly?"

"What young man?"

"Randal Leslie. How! You know him?" Here a brief explanation followed. Harley heard with attentive ear, and marked vexation, the particulars of Riccabocca's connection and implied engagement with Leslie.

"There is something very suspicious to me in all this," said he. "Why should this young man have so sounded me as to Violante's chance of losing fortune if she married an Englishman?"

"Did he? O, pooh! excuse him. It was but his natural wish to seem ignorant of all about me. He did not know enough of my intimacy with you to betray my secret."

"But he knew enough of it—must have known enough to have made it right that he should tell you I was in England. He does not seem to have done so."

"No—*that* is strange—yet scarcely strange; for, when we last met, his head was full of other things—love and marriage. *Basta!* youth will be youth."

"He has no youth left in him!" exclaimed Harley, passionately. "I doubt if he ever had any. He is one of those men who come into the world with the pulse of a centenarian. You and I never shall be as old—as he was in long-clothes. Ah, you may laugh; but I am never wrong in my instincts. I disliked him at the first—his eye, his smile, his voice, his very footstep. It is madness in you to countenance such a marriage; it may destroy all chance of your restoration."

"Better that than infringe my word once passed."

"No, no," exclaimed Harley; "your word is not passed—it shall not be passed. Nay, never look so piteously at me. At all events, pause till we know more of this young man. If he be worthy of her without a dower, why, then, let him lose your heritage. I should have no more to say."

"But why lose me my heritage? There is no law in Austria which can dictate to a father what husband to choose for his daughter."

"Certainly not. But you are out of the pale of law itself just at present; and it would surely be a reason for state policy to withhold your pardon, and it would be to the loss of that favour with you own countrymen, which would now make that pardon so popular, if it were known that the representative of your name were debased by your daughter's alliance with an

English adventurer—a clerk in a public office! O, sage in theory, why are you such a simpleton in action?"

Nothing moved by this taunt, Riccabocca rubbed his hands, and then stretched them comfortably over the fire.

"My friend," said he, "the representation of my name would pass to my son."

"But you have no son?"

"Hush! I am going to have one; my Jemima informed me of it yesterday morning; and it was upon that information that I resolved to speak to Leslie. Am I a simpleton now?"

"Going to have a son," repeated Harley, looking very bewildered; "how do you know it is to be a son?"

"Physiologists are agreed," said the sage, positively, "that where the husband is much older than the wife, and there has been a long interval without children before she condescends to increase the population of the world—she (that is, it is at least as nine to four) —she brings into the world a male. I consider that point, therefore, as settled, according to the calculations of statisticians and the researches of naturalists."

Harley could not help laughing, though he was still angry and disturbed.

"The same man as ever; always the fool of philosophy."

"*Cospetto!*" said Riccabocca. "I am rather the philosopher of fools. And talking of that, shall I present you to my Jemima?"

"Yes; but in turn I must present you to one who remembers with gratitude your kindness, and whom your philosophy, for a wonder, has not ruined. Some time or other you must explain that to me. Excuse me for a moment; I will go for him."

"For him;—for whom? In my position I must be cautious and——"

"I will answer for his faith and discretion. Meanwhile, order dinner, and let me and my friend stay to share it."

"Dinner? *Corpo di Bacco!*—not that Bacchus can help us here. What will Jemima say?"

"Henpecked man, settle that with your connubial tyrant. But dinner it must be."

I leave the reader to imagine the delight of Leonard at seeing once more Riccabocca unchanged and Violante so improved; and the kind Jemima too. And their wonder at him and his history, his books and his fame. He narrated his struggles and adventures with a simplicity that removed from a story so personal the character of egotism. But when he came to speak of Helen, he was brief and reserved.

Violante would have questioned more closely; but, to Leonard's relief, Harley interposed.

"You shall see her whom he speaks of before long, and question her yourself."

With these words, Harley turned the young man's narrative into new directions; and Leonard's words again flowed freely. Thus the evening passed away happily to all save Riccabocca. For the thought of his dead wife rose ever and anon before the exile; but when it did, and became too painful, he crept nearer to Jemima, and looked in her simple face, and pressed her cordial hand. And yet the monster had implied to Harley that his comforter was a fool—so she was, to love so contemptible a slanderer of herself and her sex.

Violante was in a state of blissful excitement; she could not analyse her own joy. But her conversation was chiefly with Leonard; and the most silent of all was Harley. He sat listening to Leonard's warm yet unpretending eloquence—that eloquence which flows so naturally from genius, when thoroughly at its ease, and not chilled back on itself by hard, unsympathising hearers—listened, yet more charmed, to the sentiments less profound, yet no less earnest—sentiments so feminine, yet so noble, with which Violante's fresh, virgin heart responded to the poet's kindling soul. Those sentiments of hers were so unlike all he heard in the common world—so akin to himself in his gone youth! Occasionally—at some high thought of her own, or some lofty line from Italian song, that she cited with lighted eyes, and in melodious accents—occasionally he reared his knightly head, and his lip quivered, as if he had heard the sound of a trumpet. The inertness of long years was shaken. The Heroic, that lay deep beneath all the humours of his temperament, was reached, appealed to; and stirred within him, rousing up all the bright associations connected with it, and long dormant. When he arose to take leave, surprised at the lateness of the hour, Harley said, in a tone that bespoke the sincerity of the compliment, "I thank you for the happiest hours I have known for years." His eye dwelt on Violante as he spoke. But timidity returned to her with his words—at his look; and it was no longer the inspired muse, but the bashful girl that stood before him.

"And when shall I see you again?" asked Riccabocca, disconsolately, following his guest to the door.

"When? Why, of course, to-morrow. Adieu! my friend. No wonder you have borne your exile so patiently,—with such a child!"

He took Leonard's arm, and walked with him to the inn where he had left his horse. Leonard spoke of Violante with enthusiasm. Harley was silent.

CHAPTER III.

The next day a somewhat old-fashioned, but exceedingly patrician, equipage stopped at Riccabocca's garden-gate. Giacomo, who, from a bedroom window, had caught sight of its winding towards the house, was seized with undefinable terror when he beheld it pause before their walls, and heard the shrill summons at the portal. He rushed into his master's presence, and implored him not to stir—not to allow any one to give ingress to the enemies the machine might disgorge. "I have heard," said he, "how a town in Italy—I think it was Bologna—was once taken and given up to the sword, by incautiously admitting a wooden horse, full of the troops of Barbarossa, and all manner of bombs and Congreve rockets."

"The story is differently told in Virgil," quoth Riccabocca, peeping out of the window. "Nevertheless, the machine looks very large and suspicious; unloose Pompey."

"Father," said Violante, colouring, "it is your friend Lord L'Estrange; I hear his voice."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. How can I be mistaken?"

"Go then, Giacomo; but take Pompey with thee—and give the alarm if we are deceived."

But Violante was right; and in a few moments Lord L'Estrange was seen walking up the garden, and giving the arm to two ladies.

"Ah," said Riccabocca, composing his dressing-robe around him, "go, my child, and summon Jemima. Man to man; but, for Heaven's sake, woman to woman."

Harley had brought his mother and Helen, in compliment to the ladies of his friends household.

The proud Countess knew that she was in the presence of Adversity, and her salute to Riccabocca was only less respectful than that which she would have rendered homage to her sovereign. But Riccabocca, always gallant to the sex that he pretended to despise, was not to be outdone in ceremony; and the bow which replied to the curtsy would have edified the rising generation, and delighted such surviving relics of the old Court breeding as may linger yet amidst the gloomy pomp of the Faubourg St Germain. These dues paid to etiquette, the Countess briefly introduced Helen as Miss Digby, and seated herself near the exile. In a few moments the two elder personages became quite at home with each other; and, really, perhaps Riccabocca had never, since we have known him, showed to such advantage as by the side of his polished, but somewhat formal visitor. Both had lived so little with our modern ill-bred age! They took out their manners of a former race, with a sort of pride in airing once more such fine lace and superb brocade. Riccabocca gave truce to the shrewd but homely wisdom of his proverbs—perhaps he remembered that Lord Chesterfield denounces proverbs as vulgar;—and gaunt though his figure, and far from elegant though his dressing-robe, there was that about him which spoke undeniably of the *grand seigneur*—of one to whom a Marquis de Dangeau would have offered a *fauteuil* by the side of the Rohans and Montmorencies.

Meanwhile Helen and Harley seated themselves a little apart, and were both silent—the first, from timidity, the second from abstraction. At length the door opened, and Harley suddenly sprang to his feet—Violante and Jemima entered. Lady Lansmere's eyes first rested on the daughter, and she could scarcely refrain from an exclamation of admiring surprise; but then, when she caught sight of Mrs Riccabocca's somewhat humble, yet not obsequious mien—looking a little shy, a little homely, yet still thoroughly a gentlewoman (though of your plain rural kind of that genus)—she turned from the daughter, and with the *savoir vivre* of the fine old school, paid her first respects to the wife; respects literally, for her manner implied respect,—but it was more kind, simple, and cordial than the respect she had shown to Riccabocca; as the sage himself had said, here "it was Woman to Woman." And then she took Violante's hand in both hers, and gazed on her as if she could not resist the pleasure of contemplating so much beauty. "My son," she said, softly, and with a half-sigh—"my son in vain told me not to be surprised. This is the first time I have ever known reality exceed description!"

Violante's blush here made her still more beautiful; and as the Countess returned to Riccabocca, she stole gently to Helen's side.

"Miss Digby, my ward," said Harley, pointedly, observing that his mother had neglected her duty of presenting Helen to the ladies. He then reseated himself, and conversed with Mrs Riccabocca; but his bright quick eye glanced over at the two girls. They were about the same age—and youth was all that, to the superficial eye, they seemed to have in common. A greater contrast could not well be conceived; and, what is strange, both gained by it. Violante's brilliant loveliness seemed yet more dazzling, and Helen's fair gentle face yet more winning. Neither had mixed much with girls of her own age; each took to the other at first sight. Violante, as the less shy, began the conversation.

"You are his ward—Lord L'Estrange's?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you came with him from Italy?"

"No, not exactly. But I have been in Italy for some years."

"Ah! you regret—nay, I am foolish—you return to your native land. But the skies in Italy are so blue—here it seems as if nature wanted colours."

"Lord L'Estrange says that you were very young when you left Italy: you remember it well. He, too, prefers Italy to England."

"He! Impossible!"

"Why impossible, fair sceptic?" cried Harley, interrupting himself in the midst of a speech to Jemima.

Violante had not dreamed that she could be overheard—she was speaking low; but, though visibly embarrassed, she answered distinctly—

"Because in England there is the noblest career for noble minds."

Harley was startled, and replied, with a slight sigh, "At your age I should have said as you do. But this England of ours is so crowded with noble minds, that they only jostle each other, and the career is one cloud of dust."

"So, I have read, seems a battle to a common soldier, but not to the chief."

"You have read good descriptions of battles, I see."

Mrs Riccabocca, who thought this remark a taunt upon her step-daughter's studies, hastened to Violante's relief.

"Her papa made her read the history of Italy, and I believe that is full of battles."

Harley.—"All history is, and all women are fond of war and of warriors. I wonder why?"

Violante (turning to Helen, and in a very low voice, resolved that Harley should not hear this time).—"We can guess why—can we not?"

Harley (hearing every word, as if it had been spoken in St Paul's Whispering Gallery).—"If you can guess, Helen, pray tell me."

Helen (shaking her pretty head, and answering with a livelier smile than usual).—"But I am not fond of war and warriors."

HARLEY (to Violante).—"Then I must appeal at once to you, self-convicted Bellona that you are. Is it from the cruelty natural to the female disposition?"

VIOLANTE (with a sweet musical laugh).—"From two propensities still more natural to it."

HARLEY.—"You puzzle me: what can they be?"

VIOLANTE.—"Pity and admiration; we pity the weak and admire the brave."

Harley inclined his head and was silent.

Lady Lansmere had suspended her conversation with Riccabocca to listen to this dialogue. "Charming!" she cried. "You have explained what has often perplexed me. Ah, Harley, I am glad to see that your satire is foiled: you have no reply to that."

"No; I willingly own myself defeated, too glad to claim the Signorina's pity, since my cavalry-sword hangs on the wall, and I can have no longer a professional pretence to her admiration."

He then rose, and glanced towards the window. "But I see a more formidable disputant for my conqueror to encounter is coming into the field—one whose profession it is to substitute some other romance for that of camp and siege."

"Our friend Leonard," said Riccabocca, turning his eye also towards the window. "True; as Quevedo says wittily, 'Ever since there has been so great a demand for type, there has been much less lead to spare for cannon-balls.'"

Here Leonard entered. Harley had sent Lady Lansmere's footman to him with a note, that prepared him to meet Helen. As he came into the room, Harley took him by the hand and led him to Lady Lansmere.

"The friend of whom I spoke. Welcome him now for my sake, ever after for his own;" and then, scarcely allowing time for the Countess's elegant and gracious response, he drew Leonard towards Helen. "Children," said he, with a touching voice, that thrilled through the hearts of both, "go and seat yourselves yonder, and talk together of the past. Signorina, I invite you to renewed discussion upon the abstruse metaphysical subject you have started; let us see if we cannot find gentler sources for pity and admiration than war and warriors." He took Violante aside to the window. "You remember that Leonard, in telling you his history last night, spoke, you thought rather too briefly, of the little girl who had been his companion in the rudest time of his trials. When you would have questioned more, I interrupted you, and said, 'You should see her shortly, and question her yourself.' And now what think you of Helen Digby? Hush, speak low. But her ears are not so sharp as mine."

Violante.—"Ah! that is the fair creature whom Leonard called his child-angel? What a lovely innocent face!—the angel is there still."

Harley (pleased both at the praise and with her who gave it).—"You think so; and you are right.

Helen is not communicative. But fine natures are like fine poems,—a glance at the first two lines suffices for a guess into the beauty that waits you if you read on."

Violante gazed on Leonard and Helen, as they sat apart. Leonard was the speaker, Helen the listener; and though the former had, in his narrative the night before, been indeed brief as to the episode in his life connected with the orphan, enough had been said to interest Violante in the pathos of their former position towards each other, and in the happiness they must feel in their meeting again—separated for years on the wide sea of life, now both saved from the storm and shipwreck. The tears came into her eyes. "True," she said, very softly, "there is more here to move pity and admiration than in"——She paused.

HARLEY. — "Complete the sentence. Are you ashamed to retract? Fie on your pride and obstinacy."

VIOLANTE.—"No; but even here there have been war and heroism—the war of genius with adversity, and heroism in the comforter who shared it and consoled. Ah! wherever pity and admiration are both felt, something nobler than mere sorrow must have gone before: the heroic must exist."

"Helen does not know what the word heroic means," said Harley, rather sadly; "you must teach her."

"Is it possible," thought he, as he spoke, "that a Randal Leslie could have charmed this grand creature? No 'Heroic,' surely, in that sleek young placeman. Your father," he said aloud, and fixing his eyes on her face, "sees much, he tells me, of a young man about Leonard's age, as to date; but I never estimate the age of men by the parish register; and I should speak of that so-called young man as a contemporary of my great-grandfather;—I mean Mr Randal Leslie. Do you like him?"

"Like him?" said Violante, slowly, as if sounding her own mind—"Like him?—yes."

"Why?" asked Harley, with dry and curt indignation.

"His visits seem to please my dear father. Certainly I like him."

"Hum. He professes to like you, I suppose?"

Violante laughed unsuspiciously. She had half a mind to reply,—"Is that so strange?" But her respect for Harley stopped her. The words would have seemed to her pert.

"I am told he is clever," resumed Harley.

"O, certainly."

"And he is rather handsome. But I like Leonard's face better."

"Better—that is not the word. Leonard's face is as that of one who has gazed so often upon Heaven; and Mr Leslie's—there is neither sunlight nor starlight reflected there."

"My dear Violante!" exclaimed Harley, overjoyed; and he pressed her hand.

The blood rushed over the girl's cheek and brow; her hand trembled in his. But Harley's familiar exclamation might have come from a father's lips.

At this moment Helen softly approached them, and looking timidly into her guardian's face, said, "Leonard's mother is with him: he asks me to call and see her. May I?"

"May you! A pretty notion the Signorina must form of your enslaved state of pupilage, when she hears you ask that question. Of course you may."

"Will you come with us?"

Harley looked embarrassed. He thought of the widow's agitation at his name; of that desire to shun him, which Leonard had confessed, and of which he thought he divined the cause. And so divining, he, too, shrank from such a meeting.

"Another time, then," said he, after a pause.

Helen looked disappointed, but said no more.

Violante was surprised at this ungracious answer. She would have blamed it as unfeeling in another. But all that Harley did was right in her eyes.

"Cannot I go with Miss Digby?" said she; "and my mother will go too. We both know Mrs Fairfield. We shall be so pleased to see her again."

"So be it," said Harley; "I will wait here with your father till you come back. O, as to my mother, she will excuse the—excuse Madame Riccabocca, and you too. See how charmed she is with *your* father. I must stay to watch over the conjugal interests of *mine*."

But Mrs Riccabocca had too much good old country breeding to leave the Countess; and Harley was forced himself to appeal to Lady Lansmere. When he had explained the case in point, the Countess rose, and said,—

"But I will call myself with Miss Digby."

"No," said Harley, gravely, but in a whisper—"no —I would rather not. I will explain later."

"Then," said the Countess aloud, after a glance of surprise at her son, "I must insist on your performing this visit, my dear madam, and you, Signorina. In truth, I have something to say confidentially to——"

"To me!" interrupted Riccabocca. "Ah, Madame la Comtesse, you restore me to five-and-twenty. Go, quick—O jealous and injured wife; go, both of you—quick; and you too, Harley."

"Nay," said Lady Lansmere, in the same tone, "Harley must stay, for my design is not at present upon destroying your matrimonial happiness, whatever it may be later. It is a design so innocent, that my son will be a partner in it."

Here the Countess put her lips to Harley's ear, and whispered. He received her communication in attentive silence; but when she had done, pressed her hand, and bowed his head, as if in assent to a proposal.

In a few minutes the three ladies and Leonard were on their road to the neighbouring cottage.

Violante, with her usual delicate intuition, thought that Leonard and Helen must have much to say to each other; and (ignorant, as Leonard himself was, of Helen's engagement to Harley) began already, in the romance natural to her age, to predict for them happy and united days in the future. So she took her stepmother's arm, and left Helen and Leonard to follow.

"I wonder," she said, musingly, "how Miss Digby became Lord L'Estrange's ward. I hope she is not very rich, nor very highborn."

"La, my love," said the good Jemima, "that is not like you; you are not envious of her, poor girl?"

"Envious! Dear mamma, what a word! But don't you think Leonard and Miss Digby seem born for each other? And then the recollections of their childhood—the thoughts of childhood are so deep, and its memories so strangely soft!" The long lashes drooped over Violante's musing eyes as she spoke. "And therefore," she said, after a pause—"therefore I hoped that Miss Digby might not be very rich nor very high-born."

"I understand you now, Violante," exclaimed Jemima, her own early passion for match-making instantly returning to her; "for as Leonard, however clever and distinguished, is still the son of Mark Fairfield, the carpenter, it would spoil all if Miss Digby was, as you say, rich and high-born. I agree with you—a very pretty match—a very pretty match, indeed. I wish dear Mrs Dale were here now—she is so clever in settling such matters."

Meanwhile Leonard and Helen walked side by side a few paces in the rear. He had not offered her his arm. They had been silent hitherto since they left Riccabocca's house.

Helen now spoke first. In similar cases it is generally the woman, be she ever so timid, who does speak first. And here Helen was the bolder; for Leonard did not disguise from himself the nature of his feelings, and Helen was engaged to another; and her pure heart was fortified by the trust reposed in it.

"And have you ever heard more of the good Dr Morgan, who had powders against sorrow, and who meant to be so kind to us — though," she added, colouring, "we did not think so then?"

"He took my child-angel from me," said Leonard, with visible emotion; "and if she had not returned, where and what should I be now? But I have forgiven him. No, I have never met him since."

"And that terrible Mr Burley?"

"Poor, poor Burley! He, too, is vanished out of my present life. I have made many inquiries after him; all I can hear is that he went abroad, supposed as a correspondent to some journal. I shall like so much to see him again, now that perhaps I could help him as he helped me."

"*Helped* you—ah!"

Leonard smiled with a beating heart, as he saw again the dear, prudent, warning look, and involuntarily drew closer to Helen. She seemed more restored to him and to her former self.

"Helped me much by his instructions; more, perhaps, by his very faults. You cannot guess, Helen—I beg pardon, Miss Digby—but I forgot that we are no longer children: you cannot guess how much we men, and more than all perhaps, we writers, whose task it is to unravel the web of human actions, owe even to our own past errors; and if we learned nothing by the errors of others, we should be dull indeed. We must know where the roads divide, and have marked where they lead to, before we can erect our sign-post; and books are the sign-posts in human life."

"Books! and I have not yet read yours. And Lord L'Estrange tells me you are famous now. Yet you remember me still — the poor orphan child, whom you first saw weeping at her father's grave, and with whom you burdened your own young life, overburdened already. No, still call me Helen—you must always be to me—a brother! Lord L'Estrange feels *that;* he said so to me when he told me that we were to meet again. He is so generous, so noble. Brother!" cried Helen, suddenly, and extending her hand, with a sweet but sublime look in her gentle face—"brother, we will never forfeit his esteem; we will both do our best to repay him! Will we not?—say so!"

Leonard felt overpowered by contending and unanalysed emotions. Touched almost to tears by the affectionate address—thrilled by the hand that pressed his own—and yet with a vague fear, a consciousness that something more than the words themselves was implied—something that checked all hope. And this word "brother," once so precious and so dear, why did he shrink from it now?—why could he not too say the sweet word "sister?"

"She is above me now and evermore!" he thought, mournfully; and the tones of his voice, when he spoke again, were changed. The appeal to renewed intimacy but made him more distant; and to that appeal itself he made no direct answer; for Mrs Riccabocca, now turning round, and pointing to the cottage which came in view, with its picturesque gable-ends, cried out—

"But is that your house, Leonard? I never saw anything so pretty."

"You do not remember it, then," said Leonard to Helen, in accents of melancholy reproach — "there where I saw you last! I doubted whether to keep it exactly as it was, and I said, 'No! the association is not changed because we try to surround it with whatever beauty we can create; the dearer the association, the more the Beautiful becomes to it natural.' Perhaps you don't understand this—perhaps it is only we poor poets who do."

"I understand it," said Helen, gently. She looked wistfully at the cottage.

"So changed—I have so often pictured it to myself —never, never like this; yet I loved it, commonplace as it was to my recollection; and the garret, and the tree in the carpenter's yard."

She did not give these thoughts utterance. And they now entered the garden.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs Fairfield was a proud woman when she received Mrs Riccabocca and Violante in her grand house; for a grand house to her was that cottage to which her boy Lenny had brought her home. Proud, indeed, ever was Widow Fairfield; but she thought then in her secret heart, that if ever she could receive in the drawing-room of that grand house the great Mrs Hazeldean, who had so lectured her for refusing to live any longer in the humble tenement rented of the Squire, the cup of human bliss would be filled, and she could contentedly die of the pride of it. She did not much notice Helen—her attention was too absorbed by the ladies who renewed their old acquaintance with her, and she carried them all over the house, yea, into the very kitchen; and so, somehow or other, there was a short time when Helen and Leonard found themselves alone. It was in the study. Helen had unconsciously seated herself in Leonard's own chair, and she was gazing with anxious and wistful interest on the scattered papers, looking so disorderly (though, in truth, in that disorder there was method, but method only known to the owner), and at the venerable well-worn books, in all languages, lying on the floor, on the chairs—anywhere. I must confess that Helen's first tidy womanlike idea was a great desire to arrange the litter. "Poor Leonard," she thought to herself—"the rest of the house so neat, but no one to take care of his own room and of him!"

As if he divined her thought, Leonard smiled and said, "It would be a cruel kindness to the spider, if the gentlest hand in the world tried to set its cobweb to rights."

HELEN.—"You were not quite so bad in the old days."

LEONARD.—"Yet even then you were obliged to take care of the money. I have more books now, and more money. My present housekeeper lets me take care of the books, but she is less indulgent as to the money."

HELEN (archly).—"Are you as absent as ever?"

LEONARD.—"Much more so, I fear: the habit is incorrigible.—Miss Digby——"

HELEN.—"Not Miss Digby—sister, if you like."

LEONARD (evading the word that implied so forbidden an affinity).—"Helen, will you grant me a favour? Your eyes and your smile say, 'yes.' Will you lay aside, for one minute, your shawl and bonnet? What! can you be surprised that I ask it? Can you not understand that I wish for one minute to think that you are at home again under this roof?"

Helen cast down her eyes, and seemed troubled; then she raised them, with a soft angelic candour in their dovelike blue, and, as if in shelter from all thoughts of more warm affection, again murmured "*brother*," and did as he asked her.

So there she sate, amongst the dull books, by his table, near the open window—her fair hair parted on her forehead—looking so good, so calm, so happy! Leonard wondered at his own self-command. His heart yearned to her with such inexpressible love—his lips so longed to murmur—"Ah, as now so could it be for ever! Is the home too mean?" But that word "brother" was as a talisman between her and him.

Yet she looked so at home—perhaps so at home she felt!—more certainly than she had yet learned to do in that stiff stately house in which she was soon to have a daughter's rights. Was she suddenly made aware of this, that she so suddenly arose, and with a look of alarm and distress on her face—

"But—we are keeping Lady Lansmere too long," she said, falteringly. "We must go now," and she hastily took up her shawl and bonnet.

Just then Mrs Fairfield entered with the visitors, and began making excuses for inattention to Miss Digby, whose identity with Leonard's child-angel she had not yet learned.

Helen received these apologies with her usual sweetness. "Nay," she said, "your son and I are such old friends, how could you stand on ceremony with me?"

"Old friends!" Mrs Fairfield stared amazed, and then surveyed the fair speaker more curiously than she had yet done. "Pretty nice-spoken thing," thought the widow; "as nice-spoken as Miss Violante, and humbler-looking like,—though, as to dress, I never see anything so elegant out of a picter."

Helen now appropriated Mrs Riccabocca's arm; and, after a kind leave-taking with the widow, the ladies returned towards Riccabocca's house.

Mrs Fairfield, however, ran after them with Leonard's hat and gloves, which he had forgotten.

"'Deed, boy," she said, kindly, yet scoldingly, "but there'd be no more fine books, if the Lord had not fixed your head on your shoulders. You would not think it, marm," she added to Mrs Riccabocca, "but sin' he has left you, he's not the 'cute lad he was; very helpless at times, marm!"

Helen could not resist turning round, and looking at Leonard, with a sly smile.

The widow saw the smile, and catching Leonard by the arm, whispered, "But, where before have you seen that pretty young lady? Old friends!"

"Ah, mother," said Leonard, sadly, "it is a long tale; you have heard the beginning—who can guess the end?"—and he escaped. But Helen still leant on the arm of Mrs Riccabocca, and, in the walk back, it seemed to Leonard as if the winter had re-settled in the sky.

Yet he was by the side of Violante, and she spoke to him with such praise of Helen! Alas! it is not always so sweet as folks say, to hear the praises of one we love. Sometimes those praises seem to ask ironically, "And what right hast thou to hope because thou lovest? *All* love *her*."

CHAPTER V.

No sooner had Lady Lansmere found herself alone with Riccabocca and Harley, than she laid her hand on the exile's arm, and, addressing him by a title she had not before given him, and from which he appeared to shrink nervously, said—"Harley, in bringing me to visit you, was forced to reveal to me your incognito, for I should have discovered it. You may not remember me, in spite of your gallantry. But I mixed more in the world than I do now, during your first visit to England, and once sate next to you at dinner at Carlton House. Nay, no compliments, but listen to me. Harley tells me you have cause for some alarm respecting the designs of an audacious and unprincipled adventurer, I may call him; for adventurers are of all ranks. Suffer your daughter to come to me, on a visit, as long as you please. With me, at least, she will be safe; and if you too, and the——"

"Stop, my dear madam," interrupted Riccabocca, with great vivacity, "your kindness overpowers me. I thank you most gratefully for your invitation to my child; but——"

"Nay," in his turn interrupted Harley, "no buts.

I was not aware of my mother's intention when she entered this room. But since she whispered it to me, I have reflected on it, and am convinced that it is but a prudent precaution. Your retreat is known to Mr Leslie—he is known to Peschiera. Grant that no indiscretion of Mr Leslie's betray the secret; still I have reason to believe that the Count guesses Randal's acquaintance with you. Audley Egerton this morning told me he had gathered that, not from the young man himself, but from questions put to himself by Madame di Negra; and Peschiera might, and would, set spies to track Leslie to every house that he visits—might and would, still môre naturally, set spies to track myself. Were this man an Englishman, I should laugh at his machinations; but he is an Italian, and has been a conspirator. What he could do I know not; but an assassin can penetrate into a camp, and a traitor can creep through closed walls to one's hearth. With my mother, Violante must be safe; that you cannot oppose, and why not come yourself?"

Riccabocca had no reply to these arguments, so far as they affected Violante; indeed, they awakened the almost superstitious terror with which he regarded his enemy, and he consented at once that Violante should accept the invitation proffered. But he refused it for himself and Jemima.

"To say truth," said he, simply, "I made a secret vow, on re-entering England, that I would associate with none who knew the rank I had formerly held in my own land. I felt that all my philosophy was needed to reconcile and habituate myself to my altered circumstances. In order to find in my present existence, however humble, those blessings which make all life noble—dignity and peace—it was necessary for poor weak human nature wholly to dismiss the past. It would unsettle me sadly, could I come to your house, renew a while, in your kindness and respect—nay, in the very atmosphere of your society—the sense of what I have been; and then (should the more than doubtful chance of recall from my exile fail me) to awake, and find myself for the rest of life what I am. And though, were I alone, I might trust myself perhaps to the danger—yet my wife; she is happy and contented now; would she be so if you had once spoiled her for the simple position of Dr Riccabocca's wife? Should I not have to listen to regrets, and hopes, and fears that would prick sharp through my thin cloak of philosophy? Even as it is, since in a moment of weakness I confided my secret to her, I have had 'my rank' thrown at me—with a careless hand, it is true—but it hits hard nevertheless. No stone hurts like one taken from the ruins of one's own home; and the grander the home, why, the heavier the stone! Protect, dear madam—protect my daughter, since her father doubts his own power to do so. But—ask no more."

Riccabocca was immovable here. And the matter was settled as he decided, it being agreed that Violante should be still styled but the daughter of Dr Riccabocca.

"And now, one word more," said Harley. "Do not confide to Mr Leslie these arrangements; do not let him know where Violante is placed—at least, until I authorise such confidence in him. It is sufficient excuse, that it is no use to know unless he called to see her, and his movements, as I said before, may be watched. You can give the same reason to suspend his visits to yourself. Suffer me, meanwhile, to mature my judgment on this young man. In the meanwhile, also, I think that I shall have means of ascertaining the real nature of Peschiera's schemes. His sister has sought to know me; I will give her the occasion. I have heard some things of her in my last residence abroad, which make me believe that she cannot be wholly the Count's tool in any schemes nakedly villanous; that she has some finer qualities in her than I once supposed; and that she can be won from his influence. It is a state of war; we will carry it into the enemy's camp. You will promise me, then, to refrain from all further confidence in Mr Leslie."

"For the present, yes," said Riccabocca, reluctantly.

"Do not even say that you have seen me, unless he first tell you that I am in England, and wish to learn your residence. I will give him full occasion to do so. Pish! don't hesitate; you know your own proverb—

'Boccha chiusa, ed occhio aperto
Non fece mai nissun deserto.'

'The close mouth and the open eye,' &c."

"That's very true," said the Doctor, much struck—"very true. '*In boccha chiusa non c'entrano mosche*:' one can't swallow flies if one keeps one's mouth shut. *Corpo di Bacco!* that's very true indeed."

CHAPTER VI.

Violante and Jemima were both greatly surprised, as the reader may suppose, when they heard, on their return, the arrangements already made for the former. The Countess insisted on taking her at once, and Riccabocca briefly said, "Certainly, the sooner the better." Violante was stunned and bewildered. Jemima hastened to make up a little bundle of things necessary, with many a woman's sigh that the poor wardrobe contained so few things befitting. But among the clothes she slipped a purse, containing the savings of months, perhaps of years, and with it a few affectionate lines, begging Violante to ask the Countess to buy her all that was proper for her father's child. There is always something hurried and uncomfortable in the abrupt and unexpected withdrawal of any member from a quiet household. The small party broke into still smaller knots. Violante hung on her father, and listened vaguely to his not very lucid explanations. The Countess approached Leonard, and, according to the usual mode with persons of quality addressing young authors, complimented him highly on the books she had not read, but which her son assured her were so remarkable. She was a little anxious to know where Harley had first met with Mr Oran, whom he called his friend; but she was too high-bred to inquire, or to express any wonder that rank should be friends with genius. She took it for granted that they had formed their acquaintance abroad.

Harley conversed with Helen.—"You are not sorry that Violante is coming to us? She will be just such a companion for you as I could desire; of your own years too."

Helen (ingenuously).—"It is hard to think I am not younger than she is."

Harley.—"Why, my dear Helen?"

Helen.—"She is so brilliant. She talks so beautifully. And I——"

Harley.—"And you want but the habit of talking, to do justice to your own beautiful thoughts."

Helen looked at him gratefully, but shook her head: it was a common trick of hers, and always when she was praised.

At last the preparations were made—the farewell was said. Violante was in the carriage by Lady Lansmere's side. Slowly moved on the stately equipage with its four horses and trim postilions, heraldic badges on their shoulders, in the style rarely seen in the neighbourhood of the metropolis, and now fast vanishing even amidst distant counties.

Riccabocca, Jemima, and Jackeymo, continued to gaze after it from the gate.

"She is gone," said Jackeymo, brushing his eyes with his coat-sleeve. "But it is a load off one's mind."

"And another load on one's heart," murmured Riccabocca. "Don't cry, Jemima; it may be bad for you, and bad for *him* that is to come. It is astonishing how the humours of the mother may affect the unborn. I should not like to have a son who has a more than usual propensity to tears."

The poor philosopher tried to smile; but it was a bad attempt. He went slowly in, and shut himself with his books. But he could not read. His whole mind was unsettled. And though, like all parents, he had been anxious to rid himself of a beloved daughter for life, now that she was gone but for a while, a string seemed broken in the Music of Home.

CHAPTER VII.

The evening of the same day, as Egerton, who was to entertain a large party at dinner, was changing his dress, Harley walked into his room.

Egerton dismissed his valet by a sign, and continued his toilet.

"Excuse me, my dear Harley, I have only ten minutes to give you. I expect one of the royal dukes, and punctuality is the stern virtue of men of business, and the graceful courtesy of princes."

Harley had usually a jest for his friend's aphorisms; but he had none now. He laid his hand kindly on Egerton's shoulder—"Before I speak of my business, tell me how you are—better?"

"Better—nay, I am always well. Pooh! I may look a little tired—years of toil will tell on the countenance. But that matters little: the period of life has passed with me when one cares how one looks in the glass."

As he spoke, Egerton completed his dress, and came to the hearth, standing there, erect and dignified as usual, still far handsomer than many a younger man, and with a form that seemed to have ample vigour to support for many a year the sad and glorious burthen of power.

"So now to your business, Harley."

"In the first place, I want you to present me, at the earliest opportunity, to Madame di Negra. You say she wished to know me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, she receives this evening. I did not mean to go; but when my party breaks up——"

"You can call for me at 'The Travellers.' Do."

"Next—you knew Lady Jane Horton better even than I did, at least in the last year of her life." Harley sighed, and Egerton turned and stirred the fire.

"Pray, did you ever see at her house, or hear her speak of, a Mrs Bertram?"

"Of whom?" said Egerton, in a hollow voice, his face still turned towards the fire.

"A Mrs Bertram; but heavens! my dear fellow, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"A spasm at the heart, that is all—don't ring—I shall be better presently—go on talking. Mrs —— why do you ask?"

"Why? I have hardly time to explain; but I am, as I told you, resolved on righting my old Italian friend, if Heaven will help me, as it ever does help the just when they bestir themselves; and this Mrs Bertram is mixed up in my friend's affairs."

"His! How is that possible?"

Harley rapidly and succinctly explained. Audley listened attentively, with his eyes fixed on the floor, and still seeming to labour under great difficulty of breathing.

At last he answered, "I remember something of this Mrs—Mrs—Bertram. But your inquiries after her would be useless. I think I have heard that she is long since dead; nay, I am sure of it."

"Dead!—that is most unfortunate. But do you know any of her relations or friends? Can you suggest any mode of tracing this packet, if it came to her hands?"

"No."

"And Lady Jane had scarcely any friend that I remember, except my mother, and she knows nothing of this Mrs Bertram. How unlucky! I think I shall advertise. Yet, no. I could only distinguish this Mrs Bertram from any other of the same name, by stating with whom she had gone abroad, and that would catch the attention of Peschiera, and set him to counterwork us."

"And what avails it?" said Egerton. "She whom you seek is no more—no more!" He paused, and went on rapidly—"The packet did not arrive in England till years after her death—was no doubt returned to the post-office—is destroyed long ago."

Harley looked very much disappointed. Egerton went on in a sort of set mechanical voice, as if not thinking of what he said, but speaking from the dry practical mode of reasoning which was habitual to him, and by which the man of the world destroys the hopes of an enthusiast. Then starting up at the sound of the first thundering knock at the street-door, he said, "Hark! you must excuse me."

"I leave you, my dear Audley. But I must again ask—Are you better now?"

"Much, much—quite well. I will call for you—probably between eleven and twelve."

CHAPTER VIII.

If any one could be more surprised at seeing Lord L'Estrange at the house of Madame di Negra that evening than the fair hostess herself, it was Randal Leslie. Something instinctively told him that this visit threatened interference with whatever might be his ultimate projects in regard to Riccabocca and Violante. But Randal Leslie was not one of those who shrink from an intellectual combat. On the contrary, he was too confident of his powers of intrigue, not to take a delight in their exercise. He could not conceive that the indolent Harley could be a match for his own restless activity and dogged perseverance. But in a very few moments fear crept on him. No man of his day could produce a more brilliant effect than Lord L'Estrange, when he deigned to desire it. Without much pretence to that personal beauty which strikes at first sight, he still retained all the charm of countenance, and all the grace of manner, which had made him in boyhood the spoiled darling of Society. Madame di Negra had collected but a small circle round her, still it was of the *élite* of the great world; not, indeed, those more precise and reserved *dames de château*, whom the lighter and easier of the fair dispensers of fashion ridicule as prudes; but, nevertheless, ladies were there, as unblemished in reputation as high in rank; flirts and coquettes, perhaps—nothing more; in short, "charming women"—the gay butterflies that hover over the stiff parterre. And there were ambassadors and ministers, and wits and brilliant debaters, and first-rate dandies (dandies, when first-rate, are generally very agreeable men). Amongst all these various persons, Harley, so long a stranger to the London world, seemed to make himself at home with the ease of an Alcibiades. Many of the less juvenile ladies remembered him, and rushed to claim his acquaintance, with nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles. He had ready compliment for each. And few indeed were there, men or women, for whom Harley L'Estrange had not appropriate attraction. Distinguished reputation as soldier and scholar for the grave; whim and pleasantry for the gay; novelty for the sated; and for the more vulgar natures was he not Lord L'Estrange, unmarried, possessed already of a large independence, and heir to an ancient earldom, and some fifty thousands a-year?

Not till he had succeeded in the general effect—which, it must be owned, he did his best to create—did Harley seriously and especially devote himself to his hostess. And then he seated himself by her side; and, as if in compliment to both, less pressing admirers insensibly slipped away and edged off.

Frank Hazeldean was the last to quit his ground behind Madame di Negra's chair; but when he found that the two began to talk in Italian, and he could not understand a word they said, he too, fancying, poor fellow, that he looked foolish, and cursing his Eton education that had neglected, for languages spoken by the dead, of which he had learned little, those still in use among the living, of which he had learned naught —retreated towards Randal, and asked wistfully, "Pray, what age should you say L'Estrange was? He must be devilish old, in spite of his looks. Why, he was at Waterloo!"

"He is young enough to be a terrible rival," answered Randal, with artful truth.

Frank turned pale, and began to meditate dreadful bloodthirsty thoughts, of which hair-triggers and Lord's cricket-ground formed the staple.

Certainly there was apparent ground for a lover's jealousy: for Harley and Beatrice now conversed in a low tone, and Beatrice seemed agitated, and Harley earnest. Randal himself grew more and more perplexed. Was Lord L'Estrange really enamoured of the Marchesa? If so, farewell to all hopes of Frank's marriage with her! Or was he merely playing a part in Riccabocca's interest; pretending to be the lover, in order to obtain an influence over her mind, rule her through her ambition, and secure an ally against her brother? Was this *finesse* compatible with Randal's notions of Harley's character? Was it consistent with that chivalric and soldierly spirit of honour which the frank nobleman affected, to make love to a woman in mere *ruse de guerre?* Could mere friendship for Riccabocca be a sufficient inducement to a man, who, whatever his weakness or his errors, seemed to wear on his very forehead a soul above deceit, to stoop to paltry means, even for a worthy end? At this question, a new thought flashed upon Randal—might not Lord L'Estrange have speculated himself upon winning Violante?—would not that account for all the exertions he had made on behalf of her inheritance at the court of Vienna—exertions of which Peschiera and Beatrice had both complained? Those objections which the Austrian government might take to Violante's marriage with some obscure Englishman, would probably not exist against a man like Harley L'Estrange, whose family not only belonged to the highest aristocracy of England, but had always supported opinions in vogue amongst the leading governments of Europe. Harley himself, it is true, had never taken part in politics, but his notions were, no doubt, those of a high-born soldier, who had fought, in alliance with Austria, for the restoration of the Bourbons. And this immense wealth—which Violante might lose, if she married one like Randal himself—her marriage with the heir of the Lansmeres might actually tend only to secure. Could Harley, with all his own expectations, be indifferent to such a prize?—and no doubt he had learned Violante's rare beauty in his correspondence with Riccabocca.

Thus considered, it seemed natural to Randal's estimate of human nature, that Harley's more prudish scruples of honour, as regards what is due to women, could not resist a temptation so strong. Mere friendship was not a motive powerful enough to shake them, but ambition was.

While Randal was thus cogitating, Frank thus suffering, and many a whisper, in comment on the evident flirtation between the beautiful hostess and the accomplished guest, reached the ears both of the brooding schemer and the jealous lover, the conversation between the two objects of remark and gossip had taken a new turn. Indeed, Beatrice had made an effort to change it.

"It is long, my lord," said she, still speaking Italian, "since I have heard sentiments like those you address to me; and if I do not feel myself wholly unworthy of them, it is from the pleasure I have felt in reading sentiments equally foreign to the language of the world in which I live." She took a book from the table as she spoke: "Have you seen this work?"

Harley glanced at the title-page. "To be sure I have, and I know the author."

"I envy you that honour. I should so like also to know one who has discovered to me deeps in my own heart which I had never explored."

"Charming Marchesa, if the book has done this, believe me that I have paid you no false compliment—formed no over-flattering estimate of your nature; for the charm of the work is but in its simple appeal to good and generous emotions, and it can charm none in whom those emotions exist not!"

"Nay, that cannot be true, or why is it so popular?"

"Because good and generous emotions are more common to the human heart than we are aware of till the appeal comes."

"Don't ask me to think that! I have found the world so base."

"Pardon me a rude question; but what do you know of the world?"

Beatrice looked first in surprise at Harley, then glanced round the room with significant irony.

"As I thought; you call this little room 'the world.' Be it so. I will venture to say, that if the people in this room were suddenly converted into an audience before a stage, and you were as consummate in the actor's art, as you are in all others that please and command——"

"Well?"

"And were to deliver a speech full of sordid and base sentiments, you would be hissed. But let any other woman, with half your powers, arise and utter sentiments sweet and womanly, or honest and lofty—and applause would flow from every lip, and tears rush to many a worldly eye. The true proof of the inherent nobleness of our common nature is in the sympathy it betrays with what is noble wherever crowds are collected. Never believe the world is base;—if it were so, no society could hold together for a day. But you would know the author of this book? I will bring him to you."

"Do."

"And now," said Harley, rising, and with his candid, winning smile, "do you think we shall ever be friends?"

"You have startled me so, that I can scarcely answer. But why would you be friends with me?"

"Because you need a friend. You have none?"

"Strange flatterer!" said Beatrice, smiling, though very sadly; and looking up, her eyes caught Randal's.

"Pooh!" said Harley, "you are too penetrating to believe that you inspire friendship *there*. Ah, do you suppose that, all the while I have been conversing with you, I have not noticed the watchful gaze of Mr Randal Leslie? What tie can possibly connect you together I know not yet; but I soon shall."

"Indeed! you talk like one of the old Council of Venice. You try hard to make me fear you," said Beatrice, seeking to escape from the graver kind of impression Harley had made on her, by the affectation, partly of coquetry, partly of levity.

"And I," said L'Estrange, calmly, "tell you already, that I fear you no more." He bowed, and passed through the crowd to rejoin Audley, who was seated in a corner whispering with some of his political colleagues. Before Harley reached the minister, he found himself close to Randal and young Hazeldean.

He bowed to the first, and extended his hand to the last. Randal felt the distinction, and his sullen, bitter pride was deeply galled—a feeling of hate towards Harley passed into his mind. He was pleased to see the cold hesitation with which Frank just touched the hand offered to him. But Randal had not been the only person whose watch upon Beatrice the keen-eyed Harley had noticed. Harley had seen the angry looks of Frank Hazeldean, and divined the cause. So he smiled forgivingly at the slight he had received.

"You are like me, Mr Hazeldean," said he. "You think something of the heart should go with all courtesy that bespeaks friendship—

'The hand of Douglas is his own.'"

Here Harley drew aside Randal. "Mr Leslie, a word with you. If I wished to know the retreat of Dr Riccabocca, in order to render him a great service, would you confide to me that secret?"

"That woman has let out her suspicions that I know the exile's retreat," thought Randal; and with quick presence of mind, he replied at once—

"My Lord, yonder stands a connection of Dr Riccabocca's. Mr Hazeldean is surely the person to whom you should address this inquiry."

"Not so, Mr Leslie; for I suspect that he cannot answer it, and that you can. Well, I will ask something that it seems to me you may grant without hesitation. Should you see Dr Riccabocca, tell him that I am in England, and so leave it to him to communicate with me or not; but perhaps you have already done so?"

"Lord L'Estrange," said Randal, bowing low, with pointed formality, "excuse me if I decline either to disclaim or acquiesce in the knowledge you impute to me. If I am acquainted with any secret intrusted to me by Dr Riccabocca, it is for me to use my own discretion how best to guard it. And for the rest, after the Scotch earl, whose words your lordship has just quoted, refused to touch the hand of Marmion, Douglas could scarcely have called Marmion back in order to give him—a message!"

Harley was not prepared for this tone in Mr Egerton's *protégé*, and his own gallant nature was rather pleased than irritated by a haughtiness that at least seemed to bespeak independence of spirit. Nevertheless, L'Estrange's suspicions of Randal were too strong to be easily set aside, and therefore he replied, civilly, but with covert taunt—

"I submit to your rebuke, Mr Leslie, though I meant not the offence you would ascribe to me. I regret my unlucky quotation yet the more, since the wit of your retort has obliged you to identify yourself with Marmion, who, though a clever and brave fellow, was an uncommonly—tricky one." And so Harley, certainly having the best of it, moved on, and joining Egerton, in a few minutes more both left the room.

"What was L'Estrange saying to you?" asked Frank: "something about Beatrice, I am sure."

"No; only quoting poetry."

"Then what made you look so angry, my dear fellow? I know it was your kind feeling for me. As you say, he is a formidable rival. But that can't be his own hair. Do you think he wears a *toupet?* I am sure he was praising Beatrice. He is evidently very much smitten with her. But I don't think she is a woman to be caught by *mere* rank and fortune! Do you? Why can't you speak?"

"If you do not get her consent soon, I think she is lost to you," said Randal, slowly; and before Frank could recover his dismay, glided from the house.

CHAPTER IX.

Violante's first evening at the Lansmeres had passed more happily to her than the first evening under the same roof had done to Helen. True that she missed her father much — Jemima somewhat; but she so identified her father's cause with Harley, that she had a sort of vague feeling that it was to promote that cause that she was on this visit to Harley's parents. And the Countess, it must be owned, was more emphatically cordial to her than she had ever been to Captain Digby's orphan. But perhaps the real difference in the heart of either girl was this, that Helen felt awe of Lady Lansmere, and Violante felt only love for Lord L'Estrange's mother. Violante, too, was one of those persons whom a reserved and formal person, like the Countess, "can get on with," as the phrase goes. Not so, poor little Helen—so shy herself, and so hard to coax into more than gentle monosyllables. And Lady Lansmere's favourite talk was always of Harley. Helen had listened to such talk with respect and interest. Violante listened to it with inquisitive eagerness—with blushing delight. The mother's heart noticed the distinction between the two, and no wonder that that heart moved more to Violante than to Helen. Lord Lansmere, too, like most gentlemen of his age, clumped all young ladies together, as a harmless, amiable, but singularly stupid class of the genus Petticoat, meant to look pretty, play the piano, and talk to each other about frocks and sweethearts. Therefore this animated dazzling creature, with her infinite variety of look and play of mind, took him by surprise, charmed him into attention, and warmed him into gallantry. Helen sat in her quiet corner, at her work, sometimes listening with almost mournful, though certainly unenvious, admiration at Violante's vivid, yet ever unconscious, eloquence of word and thought—sometimes plunged deep into her own secret meditations. And all the while the work went on the same, under the small noiseless fingers. This was one of Helen's habits that irritated the nerves of Lady Lansmere. She despised young ladies who were fond of work. She did not comprehend how often it is the resource of the sweet womanly mind, not from want of thought, but from the silence and the depth of it. Violante was surprised, and perhaps disappointed, that Harley had left the house before dinner, and did not return all the evening. But Lady Lansmere, in making excuse for his absence, on the plea of engagements, found so good an opportunity to talk of his ways in general—of his rare promise in boyhood—of her regret at the inaction of his maturity—of her hope to see him yet do justice to his natural powers, that Violante almost ceased to miss him.

And then Lady Lansmere conducted her to her room, and, kissing her cheek tenderly, said, "But you are just the person Harley admires — just the person to rouse him from melancholy dreams, of which his wild humours are now but the vain disguise"—Violante crossed her arms on her bosom, and her bright eyes, deepened into tenderness, seemed to ask, "He melancholy—and why?"

On leaving Violante's room, Lady Lansmere paused before the door of Helen's; and, after musing a little while, entered softly.

Helen had dismissed her maid; and, at the moment Lady Lansmere entered, she was kneeling at the foot of the bed, her hands clasped before her face.

Her form, thus seen, looked so youthful and child-like—the attitude itself was so holy and so touching, that the proud and cold expression on Lady Lansmere's face changed. She shaded the light involuntarily, and seated herself in silence that she might not disturb the act of prayer.

When Helen rose, she was startled to see the Countess seated by the fire, and hastily drew her hand across her eyes. She had been weeping.

Lady Lansmere did not, however, turn to observe those traces of tears, which Helen feared were too visible. The Countess was too absorbed in her own thoughts; and as Helen timidly approached, she said —still with her eyes on the clear low fire—"I beg your pardon, Miss Digby, for my intrusion; but my son has left it to me to prepare Lord Lansmere to learn the offer you have done Harley the honour to accept. I have not yet spoken to my lord; it may be days before I find a fitting occasion to do so; meanwhile, I feel assured that your sense of propriety will make you agree with me that it is due to Lord L'Estrange's father, that strangers should not learn arrangements of such moment in his family, before his own consent be obtained."

Here the Countess came to a full pause; and poor Helen, finding herself called upon for some reply to this chilling speech, stammered out, scarcely audibly—

"Certainly, madam, I never dreamed of——"

"That is right, my dear," interrupted Lady Lansmere, rising suddenly, and as if greatly relieved. "I could not doubt your superiority to ordinary girls of your age, with whom these matters are never secret for a moment. Therefore, of course, you will not mention, at present, what has passed between you and Harley, to any of the friends with whom you may correspond."

"I have no correspondents—no friends, Lady Lansmere," said Helen, deprecatingly, and trying hard not to cry.

"I am very glad to hear it, my dear; young ladies never should have. Friends, especially friends who correspond, are the worst enemies they can have. Good-night, Miss Digby. I need not add, by the way, that though we are bound to show all kindness to this young Italian lady, still she is wholly unconnected with our family; and you will be as prudent with her as you would have been with your correspondents—had you had the misfortune to have any."

Lady Lansmere said the last words with a smile, and left an ungenial kiss (the stepmother's kiss) on Helen's bended brow. She then left the room, and Helen sat on the seat vacated by the stately unloving form, and again covered her face with her hands, and again wept. But when she rose at last, and the light fell upon her face, that soft face was sad indeed, but serene—serene, as if with some inward sense of duty—sad, as with the resignation which accepts patience instead of hope.

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning Harley appeared at breakfast. He was in gay spirits, and conversed more freely with Violante than he had yet done. He seemed to amuse himself by attacking all she said, and provoking her to argument. Violante was naturally a very earnest person; whether grave or gay, she spoke with her heart on her lips, and her soul in her eyes. She did not yet comprehend the light vein of Harley's irony, so she grew piqued and chafed; and she was so lovely in anger; it so brightened her beauty and animated her words, that no wonder Harley thus maliciously teased her. But what, perhaps, she liked still less than the teasing—though she could not tell why—was the kind of familiarity that Harley assumed with her—a familiarity as if he had known her all her life—that of a good-humoured elder brother, or a bachelor uncle. To Helen, on the contrary, when he did not address her apart, his manner was more respectful. He did not call *her* by her Christian name, as he did Violante, but "Miss Digby," and softened his tone and inclined his head when he spoke to her. Nor did he presume to jest at the very few and brief sentences he drew from Helen, but rather listened to them with deference, and invariably honoured them with approval. After breakfast he asked Violante to play or sing; and when she frankly owned how little she had cultivated those accomplishments, he persuaded Helen to sit down to the piano, and stood by her side while she did so, turning over the leaves of her music-book with the ready devotion of an admiring amateur. Helen always played well, but less well than usual that day, for her generous nature felt abashed. It was as if she were showing off to mortify Violante. But Violante, on the other hand, was so passionately fond of music, that she had no feeling left for the sense of her own inferiority. Yet she sighed when Helen rose and Harley thanked Miss Digby for the delight she had given him.

The day was fine. Lady Lansmere proposed to walk in the garden. While the ladies went up stairs for their shawls and bonnets, Harley lighted his cigar, and stepped from the window upon the lawn. Lady Lansmere joined him before the girls came out.

"Harley," said she, taking his arm, "what a charming companion you have introduced to us! I never met with any that both pleased and delighted me like this dear Violante. Most girls who possess some power of conversation, and who have dared to think for themselves, are so pedantic, or so masculine; but *she* is always so simple, and always still the girl. Ah, Harley!"

"Why that sigh, my dear mother?"

"I was thinking how exactly she would have suited you—how proud I should have been of such a daughter-in-law—and how happy you would have been with such a wife."

Harley started. "Tut," said he, peevishly, "she is a mere child; you forget my years."

"Why," said Lady Lansmere, surprised, "Helen is quite as young as Violante."

"In dates—yes. But Helen's character is so staid;—what it is now it will be ever; and Helen, from gratitude, respect, or pity, condescends to accept the ruins of my heart;—while this bright Italian has the soul of a Juliet, and would expect in a husband all the passion of a Romeo. Nay, mother, hush. Do you forget that I am engaged—and of my own free will and choice? Poor dear Helen! Apropos, have you spoken to my father, as you undertook to do?"

"Not yet. I must seize the right moment. You know that my lord requires management."

"My dear mother, that female notion of marrying us men, costs you ladies a great waste of time, and occasions us a great deal of sorrow. Men are easily managed by plain truth. *We* are brought up to respect it, strange as it may seem to you!"

Lady Lansmere smiled with the air of superior wisdom, and the experience of an accomplished wife. "Leave it to me, Harley, and rely on my lord's consent."

Harley knew that Lady Lansmere always succeeded in obtaining her way with his father; and he felt that the Earl might naturally be disappointed in such an alliance, and, without due propitiation, evince that disappointment in his manner to Helen. Harley was bound to save her from all chance of such humiliation. He did not wish her to think that she was not welcomed into his family; therefore he said, "I resign myself to your promise and your diplomacy. Meanwhile, as you love me, be kind to my betrothed."

"Am I not so?"

"Hem. Are you as kind as if she were the great heiress you believe Violante to be?"

"Is it," answered Lady Lansmere, evading the question, "is it because one is an heiress and the other is not, that you make so marked a difference in your own manner to the two; treating Violante as a spoiled child, and Miss Digby as——"

"The destined wife of Lord L'Estrange, and the daughter-in-law of Lady Lansmere—yes."

The Countess suppressed an impatient exclamation that rose to her lips, for Harley's brow wore that serious aspect which it rarely assumed, save when he was in those moods in which men must be soothed, not resisted. And after a pause, he went on—"I am going to leave you to-day. I have engaged apartments at the Clarendon. I intend to gratify your wish, so often expressed, that I should enjoy what are called the pleasures of my rank, and the privileges of single-blessedness—celebrate my adieu to celibacy, and blaze once more, with the splendour of a setting sun, upon Hyde Park and May Fair."

"You are a positive enigma. Leave our house, just when you are bethrothed to its inmate! Is that the natural conduct of a lover?"

"How can your woman eyes be so dull, and your woman heart so obtuse?" answered Harley, half-laughing, half-scolding. "Can you not guess that I wish that Helen and myself should both lose the association of mere ward and guardian; that the very familiarity of our intercourse under the same roof almost forbids us to be lovers; that we lose the joy to meet, and the pang to part. Don't you remember the story of the Frenchman, who for twenty years loved a lady, and never missed passing his evenings at her house. She became a widow. 'I wish you joy,' cried his friend; 'you may now marry the woman you have so long adored.' 'Alas,' said the poor Frenchman, profoundly dejected; 'and if so, where shall I spend my evenings?'"

Here Violante and Helen were seen in the garden, walking affectionately arm in arm.

"I don't perceive the point of your witty, heartless anecdote," said Lady Lansmere, obstinately. "Settle that, however, with Miss Digby. But, to leave the very day after your friend's daughter comes as a guest!—what will *she* think of it?"

Lord L'Estrange looked steadfastly at his mother. "Does it matter much what she thinks of me?—of a man engaged to another; and old enough to be——"

"I wish to Heaven you would not talk of your age, Harley; it is a reflection upon mine; and I never saw you look so well nor so handsome." With that she drew him on towards the young ladies; and, taking Helen's arm, asked her, aside, "If she knew that Lord L'Estrange had engaged rooms at the Clarendon; and if she understood why?" As while she said this she moved on, Harley was left by Violante's side.

"You will be very dull here, I fear, my poor child," said he.

"Dull! But why *will* you call me child? Am I so very—very child-like?"

"Certainly, you are to me—a mere infant. Have I not seen you one; have I not held you in my arms?"

VIOLANTE—"But that was a long time ago!"

HARLEY.—"True. But if years have not stood still for you, they have not been stationary for me. There is the same difference between us now that there was then. And, therefore, permit me still to call you child, and as child to treat you!"

VIOLANTE.—"I will do no such thing. Do you know that I always thought I was good-tempered till this morning."

HARLEY.—"And what undeceived you? Did you break your doll?"

VIOLANTE (with an indignant flash from her dark eyes).—"There!—again!—you delight in provoking me!"

HARLEY.—"It *was* the doll, then. Don't cry; I will get you another."

Violante plucked her arm from him, and walked away towards the Countess in speechless scorn. Harley's brow contracted, in thought and in gloom. He stood still for a moment or so, and then joined the ladies.

"I am trespassing sadly on your morning; but I wait for a visitor, whom I sent to before you were up. He is to be here at twelve. With your permission, I will dine with you to-morrow, and you will invite him to meet me."

"Certainly. And who is your friend? I guess—the young author?"

"Leonard Fairfield," cried Violante, who had conquered, or felt ashamed of her short-lived anger.

"Fairfield!" repeated Lady Lansmere. "I thought, Harley, you said the name was Oran?"

"He has assumed the latter name. He is the son of Mark Fairfield, who married an Avenel. Did you recognise no family likeness?—none in those eyes—mother?" said Harley, sinking his voice into a whisper.

"No," answered the Countess, falteringly.

Harley, observing that Violante was now speaking to Helen about Leonard, and that neither was listening to him, resumed in the same low tone,—"And his mother—Nora's sister—shrank from seeing me! That is the reason why I wished you not to call. She has not told the young man *why* she shrank from seeing me; nor have I explained it to him as yet. Perhaps I never shall."

"Indeed, dearest Harley," said the Countess, with great gentleness, "I wish you too much to forget the folly—well, I will not say that word—the sorrows of your boyhood, not to hope that you will rather strive against such painful memories than renew them by unnecessary confidence to any one; least of all to the relation of——"

"Enough!—don't name her; the very name pains me. And as to confidence, there are but two persons in the world to whom I ever bare the old wounds—yourself and Egerton. Let this pass. Ha!—a ring at the bell; that is he!"

CHAPTER XI.

Leonard entered on the scene, and joined the party in the garden. The Countess, perhaps to please her son, was more than civil—she was markedly kind to him. She noticed him more attentively than she had hitherto done; and, with all her prejudices of birth, was struck to find the son of Mark Fairfield the carpenter so thoroughly the gentleman. He might not have the exact tone and phrase by which Convention stereotypes those born and schooled in a certain world; but the aristocrats of Nature can dispense with such trite minutiæ. And Leonard had lived—of late at least—in the best society that exists for the polish of language and the refinement of manners,—the society in which the most graceful ideas are clothed in the most graceful forms,—the society which really, though indirectly, gives the law to courts,—the society of the most classic authors, in the various ages in which literature has flowered forth from civilisation. And if there was something in the exquisite sweetness of Leonard's voice, look, and manner, which the Countess acknowledged to attain that perfection in high breeding, which, under the name of "suavity," steals its way into the heart, so her interest in him was aroused by a certain subdued melancholy which is rarely without distinction, and never without charm. He and Helen exchanged but few words. There was but one occasion in which they could have spoken apart, and Helen herself contrived to elude it. His face brightened at Lady Lansmere's cordial invitation, and he glanced at Helen as he accepted it; but her eye did not meet his own.

"And now," said Harley, whistling to Nero, whom his ward was silently caressing, "I must take Leonard away. Adieu! all of you, till to-morrow at dinner. Miss Violante, is the doll to have blue eyes or black?"

Violante turned her own black eyes in mute appeal to Lady Lansmere, and nestled to that lady's side, as if in refuge from unworthy insult.

CHAPTER XII.

"LET the carriage go to the Clarendon," said Harley to his servant; "I and Mr Oran will walk to town. Leonard, I think you would rejoice at an occasion to serve your old friends, Dr Riccabocca and his daughter?"

"Serve them!—O yes." And there instantly returned to Leonard the recollection of Violante's words when, on leaving his quiet village, he had sighed to part from all those he loved; and the little dark-eyed girl had said proudly, yet consolingly, "But to SERVE those you love!" He turned to L'Estrange with beaming, inquisitive eyes.

"I said to our friend," resumed Harley, "that I would vouch for your honour as my own. I am about to prove my words, and to confide the secrets which your penetration has indeed divined;—our friend is not what he seems." Harley then briefly related to Leonard the particulars of the exile's history, the rank he had held in his native land, the manner in which, partly through the misrepresentations of a kinsman he had trusted, partly through the influence of a wife he had loved, he had been drawn into schemes which he believed bounded to the emancipation of Italy from a foreign yoke, by the united exertions of her best and bravest sons.

"A noble ambition," interrupted Leonard, manfully. "And pardon me, my lord, I should not have thought that you would speak of it in a tone that implies blame."

"The ambition in itself was noble," answered Harley; "but the cause to which it was devoted became defiled in its dark channel through Secret Societies. It is the misfortune of all miscellaneous political combinations, that with the purest motives of their more generous members are ever mixed the most sordid interests, and the fiercest passions of mean confederates. When those combinations act openly, and in daylight, under the eye of Public Opinion, the healthier elements usually prevail; where they are shrouded in mystery,—where they are subjected to no censor in the discussion of the impartial and dispassionate,—where chiefs working in the dark exact blind obedience, and every man who is at war with law is at once admitted as a friend of freedom,—the history of the world tells us that patriotism soon passes away. Where all is in public, public virtue, by the natural sympathies of the common mind, and by the wholesome control of shame, is likely to obtain ascendancy; where all is in private, and shame is but for him who refuses the abnegation of his conscience, each man seeks the indulgence of his private vice. And hence, in Secret Societies (from which may yet proceed great danger to all Europe), we find but foul and hateful Eleusinia, affording pretexts to the ambition of the great, to the license of the penniless, to the passions of the revengeful, to the anarchy of the ignorant. In a word, the societies of these Italian Carbonari did but engender schemes in which the abler chiefs disguised new forms of despotism, and in which the revolutionary many looked forward to the overthrow of all the institutions that stand between Law and Chaos. Naturally, therefore," added L'Estrange, drily, "when their schemes were detected, and the conspiracy foiled, it was for the silly honest men entrapped into the league to suffer—the leaders turned king's evidence, and the common mercenaries became—banditti." Harley then proceeded to state that it was just when the *soi-disant* Riccabocca had discovered the true nature and ulterior views of the conspirators he had joined, and actually withdrawn from their councils, that he was denounced by the kinsman who had duped him into the enterprise, and who now profited by his treason. Harley next spoke of the packet despatched by Riccabocca's dying wife, as it was supposed to Mrs Bertram; and of the hopes he founded on the contents of that packet, if discovered. He then referred to the design which had brought Peschiera to England—a design which that personage had avowed with such effrontery to his companions at Vienna, that he had publicly laid wagers on his success.

"But these men can know nothing of England—of the safety of English laws," said Leonard, naturally. "We take it for granted that Riccabocca, if I am still so to call him, refuses his consent to the marriage between his daughter and his foe. Where, then, the danger? This Count, even if Violante were not under your mother's roof, could not get an opportunity to see her. He could not attack the house and carry her off like a feudal baron in the middle ages."

"All this is very true," answered Harley. "Yet I have found through life that we cannot estimate danger by external circumstances, but by the character of those from whom it is threatened. This Count is a man of singular audacity, of no mean natural talents—talents practised in every art of duplicity and intrigue; one of those men whose boast it is that they succeed in whatever they undertake; and he is, here, urged on the one hand by all that can whet the avarice, and on the other, by all that can give invention to despair. Therefore, though I cannot guess what plan he may possibly adopt, I never doubt that some plan, formed with cunning and pursued with daring, will be embraced the moment he discovers Violante's retreat, unless, indeed, we can forestall all peril by the restoration of her father, and the detection of the fraud and falsehood to which Peschiera owes the fortune he appropriates. Thus, while we must prosecute to the utmost our inquiries for the missing documents, so it should be our care to possess ourselves, if possible, of such knowledge of the Count's machinations as may enable us to defeat them. Now, it was with satisfaction that I learned in Germany that Peschiera's sister was in London. I knew enough both of his disposition and of the intimacy between himself and this lady, to make me think it probable he will seek to make her his instrument and accomplice, should he require one. Peschiera (as you may suppose by his audacious wager) is not one of those secret villains who would cut off their right hand if it could betray the knowledge of what was done by the left—rather one of those self-confident, vaunting knaves, of high animal spirits, and conscience so obtuse that it clouds their intellect—who must have some one to whom they can boast of their abilities and confide their projects. And Peschiera has done all he can to render this poor woman so wholly dependent on him, as to be his slave and his tool. But I have learned certain traits in her character that show it to be impressionable to good, and with tendencies to honour. Peschiera had taken advantage of the admiration she excited, some years ago, in a rich young Englishman, to entice this admirer into gambling, and sought to make his sister both a decoy and an instrument in his designs of plunder. She did not encourage the addresses of our countryman, but she warned him of the snare laid for him, and entreated him to leave the place, lest her brother should discover and punish her honesty. The Englishman told me this himself. In fine, my hope of detaching this lady from Peschiera's interests, and inducing her to forewarn us of his purpose, consists but in the innocent, and, I hope, laudable artifice, of redeeming herself—of appealing to, and calling into disused exercise, the better springs of her nature."

Leonard listened with admiration and some surprise to the singularly subtle and sagacious insight into character which Harley evinced in the brief clear strokes by which he had thus depicted Peschiera and Beatrice, and was struck by the boldness with which Harley rested a whole system of action upon a few deductions drawn from his reasonings on human motive and characteristic bias. Leonard had not expected to find so much practical acuteness in a man who, however accomplished, usually seemed indifferent, dreamy, and abstracted to the ordinary things of life. But Harley L'Estrange was one of those whose powers lie dormant till circumstance supplies to them all they need for activity—the stimulant of a motive.

Harley resumed—"After a conversation I had with the lady last night, it occurred to me that in this part of our diplomacy you could render us essential service. Madame di Negra—such is the sister's name—has conceived an admiration for your genius, and a strong desire to know you personally. I have promised to present you to her; and I shall do so after a preliminary caution. The lady is very handsome, and very fascinating. It is possible that your heart and your senses may not be proof against her attractions."

"Oh, do not fear that!" exclaimed Leonard, with a tone of conviction so earnest that Harley smiled.

"Forewarned is not always forearmed against the might of beauty, my dear Leonard; so I cannot at once accept your assurance. But listen to me! Watch yourself narrowly, and if you find that you are likely to be captivated, promise, on your honour, to retreat at once from the field. I have no right, for the sake of another, to expose you to danger; and Madame di Negra, whatever may be her good qualities, is the last person I should wish to see you in love with."

"In love with her! Impossible!"

"Impossible is a strong word," returned Harley; "still, I own fairly (and this belief alone warrants me in trusting you to her fascinations) that I do think, as far as one man can judge of another, that she is not the woman to attract you; and, if filled by one pure and generous object in your intercourse with her, you will see her with purged eyes. Still I claim your promise as one of honour."

"I give it," said Leonard, positively. "But how can I serve Riccabocca? How aid in——"

"Thus," interrupted Harley.—"The spell of your writings is, that, unconsciously to ourselves, they make us better and nobler. And your writings are but the impressions struck off from your mind. Your conversation, when you are roused, has the same effect. And as you grow more familiar with Madame di Negra, I wish you to speak of your boyhood, your youth. Describe the exile as you have seen him—so touching amidst his foibles, so grand amidst the petty privations of his fallen fortunes, so benevolent while poring over his hateful Machiavelli, so stingless in his wisdom of the serpent, so playfully astute in his innocence of the dove—I leave the picture to your knowledge of humour and pathos. Describe Violante brooding over her Italian poets, and filled with dreams of her fatherland;

describe her with all the flashes of her princely nature, shining forth through humble circumstance and obscure position; waken in your listener compassion, respect, admiration for her kindred exiles;—and I think our work is done. She will recognise evidently those whom her brother seeks. She will question you closely where you met with them—where they now are. Protect that secret; say at once that it is not your own. Against your descriptions and the feelings they excite, she will not be guarded as against mine. And there are other reasons why your influence over this woman of mixed nature may be more direct and effectual than my own."

"Nay, I cannot conceive that."

"Believe it, without asking me to explain," answered Harley. For he did not judge it necessary to say to Leonard, "I am high-born and wealthy—you a peasant's son, and living by your exertions. This woman is ambitious and distressed. She might have projects on me that would counteract mine on her. You she would but listen to, and receive, through the sentiments of good or of poetical that are in her—you she would have no interest to subjugate, no motive to ensnare."

"And now," said Harley, turning the subject, "I have another object in view. This foolish sage friend of ours, in his bewilderment and fears, has sought to save Violante from one rogue by promising her hand to a man who, unless my instincts deceive me, I suspect much disposed to be another. Sacrifice such exuberance of life and spirit to that bloodless heart, to that cold and earthward intellect! By heaven, it shall not be!"

"But whom can the exile possibly have seen of birth and fortunes to render him a fitting spouse for his daughter? Whom, my lord, except yourself?"

"Me!" exclamed Harley, angrily, and changing colour. "I worthy of such a creature? I—with my habits! I—silken egotist that I am! And you, a poet, to form such an estimate of one who might be the queen of a poet's dream!"

"My lord, when we sat the other night round Riccabocca's hearth—when I heard her speak, and observed you listen, I said to myself, from such knowledge of human nature as comes, we know not how, to us poets—I said, 'Harley L'Estrange has looked long and wistfully on the heavens, and he now hears the murmur of the wings that can waft him towards them.' And then I sighed, for I thought how the world rules us all in spite of ourselves, and I said, 'What pity for both, that the exile's daughter is not the worldly equal of the peer's son!' And you too sighed, as I thus thought; and I fancied that, while you listened to the music of the wing, you felt the iron of the chain. But the exile's daughter *is* your equal in birth, and you are her equal in heart and in soul."

"My poor Leonard, you rave," answered Harley, calmly. "And if Violante is not to be some young prince's bride, she should be some young poet's."

"Poet's! O, no,!" said Leonard, with a gentle laugh. "Poets need repose where *they* love!"

Harley was struck by the answer, and mused over it in silence. "I comprehend," thought he; "it is a new light that dawns on me. What is needed by the man whose whole life is one strain after glory—whose soul sinks, in fatigue, to the companionship of earth—is not the love of a nature like his own. He is right—it is repose! While I!—it is true—boy that he is, his intuitions are wiser than all my experience! It *is* excitement—energy—elevation, that Love should bestow on me. But I have chosen; and, at least, with Helen, my life will be calm, and my hearth sacred. Let the rest sleep in the same grave as my youth."

"But," said Leonard, wishing kindly to arouse his noble friend from a reverie which he felt was mournful, though he did not divine its true cause—"but you have not yet told me the name of the Signorina's suitor. May I know?"

"Probably one you never heard of. Randal Leslie—a placeman. You refused a place;—you were right."

"Randal Leslie? Heaven forbid!" cried Leonard, revealing his surprise at the name.

"Amen! But what do you know of him?"

Leonard related the story of Burley's pamphlet.

Harley seemed delighted to hear his suspicions of Randal confirmed. "The paltry pretender!—and yet I fancied that he might be formidable! However, we must dismiss him for the present;—we are approaching Madame di Negra's house. Prepare yourself, and remember your promise."

CHAPTER XIII.

Some days have passed by. Leonard and Beatrice di Negra have already made friends. Harley is satisfied with his young friend's report. He himself has been actively occupied. He has sought, but hitherto in vain, all trace of Mrs Bertram; he has put that investigation into the hands of his lawyer, and his lawyer has not been more fortunate than himself. Moreover, Harley has blazed forth again in the London world, and promises again *de faire fureur;* but he has always found time to spend some hours in the twenty-four at his father's house. He has continued much the same tone with Violante, and she begins to accustom herself to it, and reply saucily. His calm courtship to Helen flows on in silence. Leonard, too, has been a frequent guest at the Lansmeres: all welcome and like him there. Peschiera has not evinced any sign of the deadly machinations ascribed to him. He goes less into the drawing-room world; for in that world he meets Lord L'Estrange; and brilliant and handsome though Peschiera be, Lord L'Estrange, like Rob Roy Macgregor, is "on his native heath," and has the decided advantage over the foreigner. Peschiera, however, shines in the clubs, and plays high. Still scarcely an evening passes in which he and Baron Levy do not meet.

Audley Egerton has been intensely occupied with affairs. Only seen once by Harley. Harley then was about to deliver himself of his sentiments respecting Randal Leslie, and to communicate the story of Burley and the pamphlet. Egerton stopped him short.

"My dear Harley, don't try to set me against this young man. I wish to hear nothing in his disfavour. In the first place, it would not alter the line of conduct I mean to adopt with regard to him. He is my wife's kinsman; I charged myself with his career, as a wish of hers, and therefore as a duty to myself. In attaching him so young to my own fate, I drew him necessarily away from the professions in which his industry and talents (for he has both in no common degree) would have secured his fortunes; therefore, be he bad, be he good, I shall try to provide for him as I best can; and, moreover, cold as I am to him, and worldly though perhaps he be, I have somehow or other conceived an interest in him—a liking to him. He has been under my roof, he is dependent on me; he has been docile and prudent, and I am a lone childless man; therefore, spare him, since in so doing you spare me; and ah, Harley, I have so many cares on me *now*, that——"

"O, say no more, my dear, dear Audley," cried the generous friend; "how little people know you!"

Audley's hand trembled. Certainly his nerves began to show wear and tear.

Meanwhile, the object of this dialogue—the type of perverted intellect—of mind without heart—of knowledge which had no aim but power—was in a state of anxious perturbed gloom. He did not know whether wholly to believe Levy's assurance of his patron's ruin. He could not believe it when he saw that great house in Grosvenor Square, its hall crowded with lacqueys, its sideboard blazing with plate; when no dun was ever seen in the antechamber; when not a tradesman was ever known to call twice for a bill. He hinted to Levy the doubts all these phenomena suggested to him; but the Baron only smiled ominously, and said—

"True, the tradesmen are always paid; but the *how* is the question! Randal, *mon cher*, you are too innocent. I have but two pieces of advice to suggest, in the shape of two proverbs—'Wise rats run from a falling house,' and, 'Make hay while the sun shines.' Apropos, Mr Avenel likes you greatly, and has been talking of the borough of Lansmere for you. He has contrived to get together a great interest there. Make much of him."

Randal had indeed been to Mrs Avenel's *soirée dansante*, and called twice and found her at home, and been very bland and civil, and admired the children. She had two, a boy and a girl, very like their father, with open faces as bold as brass. And as all this had won Mrs Avenel's good graces, so it had propitiated her husband's. Avenel was shrewd enough to see how clever Randal was. He called him "smart," and said "he would have got on in America," which was the highest praise Dick Avenel ever accorded to any man. But Dick himself looked a little careworn; and this was the first year in which he had murmured at the bills of his wife's dressmaker, and said with an oath, that "there was such a thing as going *too* much ahead."

Randal had visited Dr Riccabocca, and found Violante flown. True to his promise to Harley, the Italian refused to say where, and suggested, as was agreed, that for the present it would be more prudent if Randal suspended his visits to himself. Leslie, not liking this proposition, attempted to make himself still necessary, by working on Riccabocca's fears as to that espionage on his retreat, which had been among the reasons that had hurried the sage into offering Randal Violante's hand. But Riccabocca had already learned that the fancied spy was but his neighbour Leonard; and, without so saying, he cleverly contrived to make the supposition of such espionage an additional reason for the cessation of Leslie's visits. Randal then, in his own artful, quiet, roundabout way, had sought to find out if any communication had passed between L'Estrange and Riccabocca. Brooding over Harley's words to him, he suspected there had been such communication, with his usual penetrating astuteness. Riccabocca, here, was less on his guard, and rather parried the sidelong questions than denied their inferences.

Randal began already to surmise the truth. Where was it likely Violante should go but to the Lansmeres? This confirmed his idea of Harley's pretensions to her hand. With such a rival what chance had he? Randal never doubted for a moment that the pupil of Machiavelli would "throw him over," if such an alliance to his daughter really presented itself. The schemer at once discarded from his projects all further aim on Violante; either she would be poor, and he would not have her; or she would be rich, and her father would give her to another. As his heart had never been touched by the fair Italian, so the moment her inheritance became more doubtful, it gave him no pang to lose her; but he did feel very sore and resentful at the thought of being supplanted by Lord L'Estrange—the man who had insulted him.

Neither, as yet, had Randal made any way in his designs on Frank. For several days Madame di Negra had not been at home either to himself or young Hazeldean; and Frank, though very unhappy, was piqued and angry; and Randal suspected, and suspected, and suspected, he knew not exactly what, but that the devil was not so kind to him there as that father of lies ought to have been to a son so dutiful. Yet, with all these discouragements, there was in Randal Leslie so dogged and determined a conviction of his own success—there was so great a tenacity of purpose under obstacles, and so vigilant an eye upon all chances that could be turned to his favour, that he never once abandoned hope, nor did more than change the details in his main schemes. Out of calculations apparently the most far-fetched and improbable, he had constructed a patient policy, to which he obstinately clung. How far his reasonings and patience served to his ends, remains yet to be seen. But could our contempt for the baseness of Randal himself be separated from the faculties which he elaborately degraded to the service of that baseness, one might allow that there was something one could scarcely despise in this still self-reliance, this inflexible resolve. Had such qualities, aided as they were by abilities of no ordinary acuteness, been applied to objects commonly honest, one would have backed Randal Leslie against any fifty picked prizemen from the colleges. But there are judges of weight and metal who do that now, especially Baron Levy, who says to himself, as he eyes that pale face all intellect, and that spare form all nerve, "This is a man who must make way in life ; he is worth helping."

By the words "worth helping," Baron Levy meant "worth getting into my power, that he may help me."

CHAPTER XIV.

But Parliament had met. Events that belong to history had contributed yet more to weaken the administration. Randal Leslie's interest became absorbed in politics; for the stake to him was his whole political career. Should Audley lose office, and for good, Audley could aid him no more; but to abandon his patron, as Levy recommended, and pin himself, in the hope of a seat in Parliament, to a stranger—an obscure stranger, like Dick Avenel—that was a policy not to be adopted at a breath. Meanwhile, almost every night, when the House met, that pale face and spare form, which Levy so identified with shrewdness and energy, might be seen amongst the benches appropriated to those more select strangers who obtain the Speaker's order of admission. There, Randal heard the great men of that day, and with the half-contemptuous surprise at their fame, which is common enough amongst clever well-educated young men, who know not what it is to speak in the House of Commons. He heard much slovenly English, much trite reasoning, some eloquent thoughts, and close argument, often delivered in a jerking tone of voice (popularly called the Parliamentary *twang*), and often accompanied by gesticulations that would have shocked the manager of a provincial theatre. He thought how much better than these great dons (with but one or two exceptions) he himself could speak—with what more refined logic—with what more polished periods—how much more like Cicero and Burke! Very probably he might have so spoken, and for that very reason have made that deadest of all dead failures—a pretentious imitation of Burke and Cicero. One thing, however, he was obliged to own—viz. that in a popular representative assembly it is not precisely knowledge which is power, or if knowledge, it is but the knowledge of that particular assembly, and what will best take with it;—passion, invective, sarcasm, bold declamation, shrewd common sense, the readiness so rarely found in a very profound mind—he owned that all these were the qualities that told; when a man who exhibited nothing but "knowledge" in the ordinary sense of the word, stood an imminent chance of being coughed down.

There at his left—last but one in the row of the ministerial chiefs—Randal watched Audley Egerton, his arms folded on his breast, his hat drawn over his brows, his eyes fixed with steady courage on whatever speaker in the Opposition held possession of the floor. And twice Randal heard Egerton speak, and marvelled much at the effect that minister produced. For of those qualities enumerated above, and which Randal had observed to be most sure of success, Audley Egerton only exhibited to a marked degree—the common sense and the readiness. And yet, though but little applauded by noisy cheers, no speaker seemed more to satisfy friends, and command respect from foes. The true secret was this, which Randal might well not divine, since that young person, despite his ancient birth, his Eton rearing, and his refined air, was not one of Nature's gentlemen;—the true secret was, that Audley Egerton moved, looked, and spoke like a thorough gentleman of England. A gentleman of more than average talents, and of long experience, speaking his sincere opinions—not a rhetorician aiming at effect. Moreover, Egerton was a consummate man of the world. He said, with nervous simplicity, what his party desired to be said, and put what his opponents felt to be the strong points of the case. Calm and decorous, yet spirited and energetic, with little variety of tone, and action subdued and rare, but yet signalised by earnest vigour, Audley Egerton impressed the understanding of the dullest, and pleased the taste of the most fastidious.

But once, when allusions were made to a certain popular question, on which the premier had announced his resolution to refuse all concession, and on the expediency of which it was announced that the cabinet was nevertheless divided—and when such allusions were coupled with direct appeals to Mr Egerton, as "the enlightened member of a great commercial constituency," and with a flattering doubt that "that Right Honourable gentleman, member for that great city, identified with the cause of the Burgher class, could be so far behind the spirit of the age as his official chief,"—Randal observed that Egerton drew his hat still more closely over his brows, and turned to whisper with one of his colleagues. He could not be *got up* to speak.

That evening Randal walked home with Egerton, and intimated his surprise that the minister had declined what seemed to him a good occasion for one of those brief, weighty replies by which Audley was chiefly distinguished—an occasion to which he had been loudly invited by the "hears" of the House.

"Leslie," answered the statesman, briefly, "I owe all my success in Parliament to this rule—I have never spoken against my convictions. I intend to abide by it to the last."

"But if the question at issue comes before the House, you will vote against it?"

"Certainly, I vote as a member of the cabinet. But since I am not leader and mouthpiece of the party, I retain as an individual the privilege to speak or keep silence."

"Ah, my dear Mr Egerton," exclaimed Randal, "forgive me. But this question, right or wrong, has got such hold of the public mind. So little, if conceded in time, would give content; and it is so clear (if I may judge by the talk I hear everywhere I go) that by refusing all concession, the Government must fall, that I wish——"

"So do I wish," interrupted Egerton, with a gloomy, impatient sigh—"so do I wish! But what avails it? If my advice had been taken but three weeks ago—now it is too late—we could have doubled the rock; we refused, we must split upon it."

This speech was so unlike the discreet and reserved minister, that Randal gathered courage to proceed with an idea that had occurred to his own sagacity. And before I state it, I must add that Egerton had of late shown much more personal kindness to his *protégé*; whether his spirits were broken, or that at last, close and compact as his nature of bronze was, he felt the imperious want to groan aloud in some loving ear, the stern Audley seemed tamed and softened. So Randal went on.

"May I say what I have heard expressed with regard to you and your position—in the streets—in the clubs?"

"Yes, it is in the streets and the clubs that statesmen should go to school. Say on."

"Well, then, I have heard it made a matter of wonder why you, and one or two others I will not name, do not at once retire from the ministry, and on the avowed ground that you side with the public feeling on this irresistible question."

"Eh!"

"It is clear that in so doing you would become the most popular man in the country—clear that you would be summoned back to power on the shoulders of the people. No new cabinet could be formed without you, and your station in it would perhaps be higher, for life, than that which you may now retain but for a few weeks longer. Has not this ever occurred to you?"

"Never," said Audley, with dry composure.

Amazed at such obtuseness, Randal exclaimed, "Is it possible! And yet, forgive me if I say I think you are ambitious, and love power."

"No man more ambitious; and if by power you mean office, it has grown the habit of my life, and I shall not know what to do without it."

"And how, then, has what seems to me so obvious never occurred to you?"

"Because you are young, and therefore I forgive you; but not the gossips who could wonder why Audley Egerton refused to betray the friends of his whole career, and to profit by the treason."

"But one should love one's country before a party."

"No doubt of that; and the first interest of a country is the honour of its public men."

"But men may leave their party without dishonour!"

"Who doubts that? Do you suppose that if I were an ordinary independent member of parliament, loaded with no obligations, charged with no trust, I could hesitate for a moment what course to pursue? Oh, that I were but the member for ——! Oh, that I had the full right to be a free agent! But if a member of a cabinet, a chief in whom thousands confide, because he is outvoted in a council of his colleagues, suddenly retires, and by so doing breaks up the whole party, whose confidence he has enjoyed, whose rewards he has reaped, to whom he owes the very position which he employs to their ruin—own that though his choice may be honest, it is one which requires all the consolations of conscience."

"But you will have those consolations. And," added Randal, energetically, "the gain to your career will be so immense!"

"That is precisely what it cannot be," answered Egerton, gloomily. "I grant that I may, if I choose, resign office with the present Government, and so at once destroy that Government; for my resignation on such ground would suffice to do it. I grant this; but for that very reason I could not the next day take office with another administration. I could not accept wages for desertion. No gentleman could! and therefore——" Audley stopped short, and buttoned his coat over his broad breast. The action was significant; it said that the man's mind was made up.

In fact, whether Audley Egerton was right or wrong in his theory, depends upon much subtler, and perhaps loftier views in the casuistry of political duties, than it was in his character to take. And I guard myself from saying anything in praise or disfavour of his notions, or implying that he is a fit or unfit example in a parallel case. I am but describing the man as he was, and as a man like him would inevitably be, under the influences in which he lived, and in that peculiar world of which he was so emphatically a member. "*Ce n'est pas moi qui parle, c'est Marc Aurèle.*"

He speaks, not I.

Randal had no time for further discussion. They now reached Egerton's house, and the minister, taking the chamber candlestick from his servant's hand, nodded a silent good-night to Leslie, and with a jaded look retired to his room.

CHAPTER XV.

But not on the threatened question was that eventful campaign of Party decided. The Government fell less in battle than skirmish. It was one fatal Monday—a dull question of finance and figures. Prosy and few were the speakers. All the Government silent, save the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and another business-like personage connected with the Board of Trade, whom the House would hardly condescend to hear. The House was in no mood to think of facts and figures. Early in the evening, between nine and ten, the Speaker's sonorous voice sounded, "Strangers must withdraw!" And Randal, anxious and foreboding, descended from his seat and went out of the fatal doors. He turned to take a last glance at Audley Egerton. The whipper-in was whispering to Audley; and the minister pushed back his hat from his brows, and glanced round the House, and up into the galleries, as if to calculate rapidly the relative numbers of the the two armies in the field; then he smiled bitterly, and threw himself back into his seat. That smile long haunted Leslie.

Amongst the strangers thus banished with Randal, while the division was being taken, were many young men, like himself, connected with the administration—some by blood, some by place. Hearts beat loud in the swarming lobbies. Ominous mournful whispers were exchanged. "They say the Government will have a majority of ten." "No; I hear they will certainly be beaten." "H—— says by fifty." "I don't believe it," said a Lord of the Bedchamber; "it is impossible. I left five Government members dining at the 'Travellers.'" "No one thought the division would be so early." "A trick of the Whigs—shameful." "Wonder some one was not set up to talk for time; very odd P—— did not speak; however, he is so cursedly rich, he does not care whether he is out or in." "Yes; and Audley Egerton too, just such another; glad, no doubt, to be set free to look after his property; very different tactics if we had men to whom office was as necessary as it is—to me!" said a candid young placeman. Suddenly the silent Leslie felt a friendly grasp on his arm. He turned and saw Levy.

"Did I not tell you?" said the Baron, with an exulting smile.

"You are sure, then, that the Government will be outvoted?"

"I spent the morning in going over the list of members with a parliamentary client of mine, who knows them all as a shepherd does his sheep. Majority for the Opposition at least twenty-five."

"And in that case must the Government resign, sir?" asked the candid young placeman, who had been listening to the smart well-dressed Baron, "his soul planted in his ears."

"Of course, sir," replied the Baron, blandly, and offering his snuff-box (true Louis Quinze, with a miniature of Madame de Pompadour set in pearls). "You are a friend to the present ministers? You could not wish them to be mean enough to stay in?" Randal drew aside the Baron.

"If Audley's affairs are as you state, what can he do?"

"I shall ask him that question to-morrow," answered the Baron, with a look of visible hate. "And I have come here just to see how he bears the prospect before him."

"You will not discover that in his face. And those absurd scruples of his! If he had but gone out in time—to come in again with the new men!"

"Oh, of course, our Right Honourable is too punctilious for that!" answered the Baron, sneering.

Suddenly the doors opened—in rushed the breathless expectants. "What are the numbers? What is the division?"

"Majority against ministers," said a member of Opposition, peeling an orange, "twenty-nine."

The Baron, too, had a Speaker's order; and he came into the House with Randal, and sat by his side. But, to their disgust, some member was talking about the other motions before the House.

"What! has nothing been said as to the division?"

asked the Baron of a young county member, who was talking to some non-parliamentary friend in the bench before Levy. The county member was one of the Baron's pet eldest sons—had dined often with Levy—was under "obligations" to him. The young legislator looked very much ashamed of Levy's friendly pat on his shoulder, and answered, hurriedly, "O yes; H—— asked, 'if, after such an expression of the House, it was the intention of ministers to retain their places, and carry on the business of the Government?'"

"Just like H——! Very inquisitive mind! And what was the answer he got?"

"None," said the county member; and returned in haste to his proper seat in the body of the House.

"There comes Egerton," said the Baron. And, indeed, as most of the members were now leaving the House, to talk over affairs at clubs or in saloons, and spread through town the great tidings, Audley Egerton's tall head was seen towering above the rest. And Levy turned away disappointed. For not only was the minister's handsome face, though pale, serene and cheerful, but there was an obvious courtesy, a marked respect, in the mode in which that assembly—heated though it was—made way for the fallen minister as he passed through the jostling crowd. And the frank, urbane nobleman, who afterwards, from the force, not of talent but of character, became the leader in that House, pressed the hand of his old opponent as they met in the throng near the doors, and said aloud, "I shall not be a proud man if ever I live to have office;

but I shall be proud if ever I leave it with as little to be said against me as your bitterest opponents can say against you, Egerton."

"I wonder," exclaimed the Baron aloud, and leaning over the partition that divided him from the throng below, so that his voice reached Egerton—and there was a cry from formal indignant members, "Order in the strangers' gallery!" "I wonder what Lord L'Estrange will say!"

Audley lifted his dark brows, surveyed the Baron for an instant with flashing eyes, then walked down the narrow defile between the last benches, and vanished from the scene in which, alas! so few of the most admired performers leave more than an actor's short-lived name!

CHAPTER XVI.

Baron Levy did not execute his threat of calling on Egerton the next morning. Perhaps he shrank from again meeting the flash of those indignant eyes. And indeed Egerton was too busied all the forenoon to see any one not upon public affairs, except Harley, who hastened to console or cheer him. When the House met, it was announced that the ministers had resigned, only holding their offices till their successors were appointed. But already there was some reaction in their favour; and when it became generally known that the new administration was to be formed of men, few indeed of whom had ever before held office, the common superstition in the public mind, that government is like a trade, in which a regular apprenticeship must be served, began to prevail; and the talk at the clubs was, that the new men could not stand; that the former ministry, with some modification, would be back in a month. Perhaps that too might be a reason why Baron Levy thought it prudent not prematurely to offer vindictive condolences to Mr Egerton. Randal spent part of his morning in inquiries as to what gentlemen in his situation meant to do with regard to their places: he heard with great satisfaction that very few intended to volunteer retirement from their desks. As Randal himself had observed to Egerton, "their country before their party!"

Randal's place was of great moment to him; its duties were easy, its salary amply sufficient for his wants, and defrayed such expenses as were bestowed on the education of Oliver and his sister. For I am bound to do justice to this young man—indifferent as he was towards his species in general, the ties of family were strong with him; and he stinted himself in many temptations most alluring to his age, in the endeavour to raise the dull honest Oliver and the loose-haired pretty Juliet somewhat more to his own level of culture and refinement. Men essentially griping and unscrupulous often do make the care for their family an apology for their sins against the world. Even Richard III., if the chroniclers are to be trusted, excused the murder of his nephews by his passionate affection for his son. With the loss of that place, Randal lost all means of support, save what Audley could give him; and if Audley were in truth ruined! Moreover, Randal had already established at the office a reputation for ability and industry. It was a career in which, if he abstained from party politics, he might rise to a fair station and to a considerable income. Therefore, much contented with what he learned as to the general determination of his fellow-officials, a determination warranted by ordinary precedent in such cases, Randal dined at a club with good relish, and much Christian resignation for the reverse of his patron, and then walked to Grosvenor Square, on the chance of finding Audley within. Learning that he was so, from the porter who opened the door, Randal entered the library. Three gentlemen were seated there with Egerton : one of the three was Lord L'Estrange ; the other two were members of the really defunct, though nominally still existing, Government. He was about to withdraw from intruding on this conclave, when Egerton said to him gently, "Come in, Leslie ; I was just speaking about yourself."

"About me, sir?"

"Yes ; about you and the place you hold. I had asked Sir —— (pointing to a fellow-minister) whether I might not, with propriety, request your chief to leave some note of his opinion of your talents, which I know is high, and which might serve you with his successor."

"Oh, sir, at such a time to think of me!" exclaimed Randal ; and he was genuinely touched.

"But," resumed Audley, with his usual dryness, "Sir ——, to my surprise, thinks that it would better become you that you should resign. Unless his reasons, which he has not yet stated, are very strong, such would not be my advice."

"My reasons," said Sir ——, with official formality, "are simply these : I have a nephew in a similar situation ; he will resign, as a matter of course. Every one in the public offices, whose relations and near connections hold high appointments in the Government, will do so. I do not think Mr Leslie will like to feel himself a solitary exception."

"Mr Leslie is no relation of mine—not even a near connection," answered Egerton.

"But his name is so associated with your own—he has resided so long in your house—is so well known in society (and don't think I compliment when I add, that we hope so well of him), that I can't think it worth his while to keep this paltry place, which incapacitates him too from a seat in Parliament."

Sir —— was one of those terribly rich men to whom all considerations of mere bread and cheese are paltry. But I must add that he supposed Egerton to be still wealthier than himself, and sure to provide handsomely for Randal, whom Sir —— rather liked than not; and for Randal's own sake, Sir —— thought it would lower him in the estimation of Egerton himself, despite that gentleman's advocacy, if he did not follow the example of his avowed and notorious patron.

"You see, Leslie," said Egerton, checking Randal's meditated reply, "that nothing can be said against your honour if you stay where you are; it is a mere question of expediency; I will judge that for you; keep your place."

Unhappily the other member of the Government, who had hitherto been silent, was a literary man. Unhappily, while this talk had proceeded, he had placed his hand upon Randal Leslie's celebrated pamphlet, which lay on the library table; and, turning over the leaves, the whole spirit and matter of that masterly composition in defence of the administration (a composition steeped in all the essence of party) recurred to his too faithful recollection. He, too, liked Randal; he did more — he admired the author of that striking and effective pamphlet. And therefore, rousing himself from the sublime indifference he had before felt for the fate of a subaltern, he said, with a bland and complimentary smile, "No; the writer of this most able publication is no ordinary placeman. His opinions also are too vigorously stated; this fine irony on the very person who in all probability will be the chief in his office, has excited too lively an attention to allow him the *sedet æternumque sedebit* on an official stool. Ha, ha! this is so good! Read it L'Estrange. What say you?"

Harley glanced over the page pointed out to him. The original was in one of Burley's broad, coarse, but telling burlesques, strained fine through Randal's more polished satire. It was capital. Harley smiled, and lifted his eyes to Randal. The unlucky plagiarist's face was flushed—the beads stood on his brow. Harley was a good hater; he loved too warmly not to err on the opposite side; but he was one of those men who forget hate when its object is distressed and humbled. He put down the pamphlet and said, "I am no politician; but Egerton is so well known to be fastidious and over-scrupulous in all points of official etiquette, that Mr Leslie cannot follow a safer counsellor."

"Read that yourself, Egerton," said Sir ——; and he pushed the pamphlet to Audley.

Now Egerton had a dim recollection that that pamphlet was unlucky; but he had skimmed over its contents hastily, and at that moment had forgotten all about it. He took up the too famous work with a reluctant hand, but he read attentively the passages pointed out to him, and then said gravely and sadly—

"Mr Leslie, I retract my advice. I believe Sir —— is right; that the nobleman here so keenly satirised will be the chief in your office. I doubt whether he will not compel your dismissal; at all events, he could scarcely be expected to promote your advancement. Under the circumstances, I fear you have no option as a ——" Egerton paused a moment, and, with a sigh that seemed to settle the question, concluded with—"as a gentleman."

Never did Jack Cade, never did Wat Tyler, feel a more deadly hate to that word "gentleman," than the well-born Leslie felt then; but he bowed his head, and answered with his usual presence of mind—

"You utter my own sentiment."

"You think we are right, Harley?" asked Egerton, with an irresolution that surprised all present.

"I think," answered Harley, with a compassion for Randal that was almost over-generous, and yet with an *équivoque* on the words, despite the compassion—"I think whoever has served Audley Egerton, never yet has been a loser by it; and if Mr Leslie wrote this pamphlet, he must have well served Audley Egerton. If he undergoes the penalty, we may safely trust to Egerton for the compensation."

"My compensation has long since been made," answered Randal, with grace; "and that Mr Egerton could thus have cared for my fortunes, at an hour so occupied, is a thought of pride which——"

"Enough, Leslie! enough!" interrupted Egerton, rising and pressing his *protégé's* hand. "See me before you go to bed."

Then the two other ministers rose also and shook hands with Leslie, and told him he had done the right thing, and that they hoped soon to see him in Parliament; and hinted, smilingly, that the next administration did not promise to be very long-lived; and one asked him to dinner, and the other to spend a week at his country seat. And amidst these congratulations at the stroke that left him penniless, the distinguished pamphleteer left the room. How he cursed big John Burley!

CHAPTER XVII.

It was past midnight when Audley Egerton summoned Randal. The statesman was then alone, seated before his great desk, with its manifold compartments, and engaged on the task of transferring various papers and letters, some to the waste-basket, some to the flames, some to two great iron chests, with patent locks, that stood, open-mouthed, at his feet. Strong, stern, and grim, looked those iron chests, silently receiving the relics of power departed; strong, stern, and grim as the grave. Audley lifted his eyes at Randal's entrance, signed to him to take a chair, continued his task for a few moments, and then turning round, as if by an effort, he plucked himself from his master-passion—Public Life—he said, with deliberate tones—

"I know not, Randal Leslie, whether you thought me needlessly cautious, or wantonly unkind, when I told you never to expect from me more than such advance to your career as my then position could effect—never to expect from my liberality in life, nor from my testament in death—an addition to your private fortunes. I see by your gesture what would be your reply, and I thank you for it. I now tell you as yet in confidence, though before long it can be no secret to the world, that my pecuniary affairs have been so neglected by me in my devotion to those of the State, that I am somewhat like the man who portioned out his capital at so much a day, calculating to live just long enough to make it last. Unfortunately he lived too long." Audley smiled—but the smile was cold as a sunbeam upon ice—and went on with the same firm unfaltering accents: "The prospects that face me I am prepared for; they do not take me by surprise. I knew long since how this would end, if I survived the loss of office. I knew it before you came to me, and therefore I spoke to you as I did, judging it manful and right to guard you against hopes which you might otherwise have naturally entertained. On this head, I need say no more. It may excite your surprise, possibly your blame, that I, esteemed methodical and practical enough in the affairs of the State, should be so imprudent as to my own."

"Oh, sir! you owe no account to me."

"To you, at least, as much as to any one. I am a solitary man; my few relations need nothing from me. I had a right to spend what I possessed as I pleased; and if I have spent it recklessly as regards myself, I have not spent it ill in its effects on others. It has been my object for many years to have no *Private Life*—to dispense with its sorrows, joys, affections; and as to its duties, they did not exist for me.—I have said." Mechanically, as he ended, the minister's hand closed the lid of one of the iron boxes, and on the closed lid he rested his firm foot. "But now," he resumed, "I have failed to advance your career. True, I warned you that you drew into a lottery; but you had more chance of a prize than a blank. A blank, however, it has turned out, and the question becomes grave—What are you to do?"

Here, seeing that Egerton came to a full pause, Randal answered, readily—

"Still, sir, to go by your advice."

"My advice," said Audley, with a softened look, "would perhaps be rude and unpalatable. I would rather place before you an option. On the one hand, recommence life again. I told you that I would keep your name on your college books. You can return—you can take your degree—after that, you can go to the bar—you have just the talents calculated to succeed in that profession. Success will be slow, it is true; but, with perseverance, it will be sure. And, believe me, Leslie, Ambition is only sweet while it is but the loftier name for Hope. Who would care for a fox's brush if it had not been rendered a prize by the excitement of the chase?"

"Oxford—again! It is a long step back in life," said Randal, drearily, and little heeding Egerton's unusual indulgence of illustration. "A long step back—and to what? To a profession in which one never begins to rise till one's hair is grey! Besides, how live in the meanwhile?"

"Do not let that thought disturb you. The modest income that suffices for a student at the bar, I trust, at least, to insure you from the wrecks of my fortune."

"Ah, sir, I would not burthen you farther. What right have I to such kindness, save my name of Leslie?" And in spite of himself, as Randal concluded, a tone of bitterness, that betrayed reproach, broke forth. Egerton was too much the man of the world not to comprehend the reproach, and not to pardon it.

"Certainly," he answered, calmly, "as a Leslie you are entitled to my consideration, and would have been entitled perhaps to more, had I not so explicitly warned you to the contrary. But the bar does not seem to please you?"

"What is the alternative, sir? Let me decide when I hear it," answered Randal, sullenly. He began to lose respect for the man who owned he could do so little for him, and who evidently recommended him to shift for himself.

If one could have pierced into Egerton's gloomy heart as he noted the young man's change of tone, it may be a doubt whether one would have seen there pain or pleasure—pain, for merely from the force of habit he had begun to like Randal—or pleasure, at the thought that he might have reason to withdraw that liking. So lone and stoical had grown the man, who had made it his object to have no private life! Revealing, however, neither pleasure nor pain, but with the composed calmness of a judge upon the bench, Egerton replied—

"The alternative is, to continue in the course you have begun, and still to rely on me."

"Sir, my dear Mr Egerton," exclaimed Randal, regaining all his usual tenderness of look and voice, "rely on you! But that is all I ask! Only——"

"Only, you would say, I am going out of power, and you don't see the chance of my return?"

"I did not mean that."

"Permit me to suppose that you did: very true; but the party I belong to is as sure of return as the pendulum of that clock is sure to obey the mechanism that moves it from left to right. Our successors profess to come in upon a popular question. All administrations who do that are necessarily short-lived. Either they do not go far enough to please present supporters, or they go so far as to arm new enemies in the rivals who outbid them with the people. 'Tis the history of all revolutions, and of all reforms. Our own administration in reality is destroyed for having passed what was called a popular measure a year ago, which lost us half our friends, and refusing to propose another popular measure this year, in the which we are outstripped by the men who halloo'd us on to the last. Therefore, whatever our successors do, we shall, by the law of reaction, have another experiment of power afforded to ourselves. It is but a question of time; you can wait for it; whether I can is uncertain. But if I die before that day arrives, I have influence enough still left with those who will come in, to obtain a promise of a better provision for you than that which you have lost. The promises of public men are proverbially uncertain. But I shall intrust your cause to a man who never failed a friend, and whose rank will enable him to see that justice is done to you—I speak of Lord L'Estrange."

"Oh, not him; he is unjust to me; he dislikes me; he——"

"May dislike you (he has his whims), but he loves me; and though for no other human being but you would I ask Harley L'Estrange a favour, yet for *you* I will," said Egerton, betraying, for the first time in that dialogue, a visible emotion—"for you, a Leslie, a kinsman, however remote, to the wife from whom I received my fortune! And despite all my cautions, it is possible that in wasting that fortune I may have wronged you. Enough! You have now before you the two options, much as you had at first; but you have at present more experience to aid you in your choice. You are a man, and with more brains than most men; think over it well, and decide for yourself. Now to bed, and postpone thought till the morrow. Poor Randal, you look pale!"

Audley, as he said the last words, put his hand on Randal's shoulder, almost with a father's gentleness; and then suddenly drawing himself up, as the hard inflexible expression, stamped on that face by years, returned, he moved away, and resettled to Public Life and the iron box.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Early the next day Randal Leslie was in the luxurious business-room of Baron Levy. How unlike the cold Doric simplicity of the statesman's library! Axminster carpets three inches thick, *portières à la Française* before the doors; Parisian bronzes on the chimney-piece; and all the receptacles that lined the room, and contained title-deeds and post-obits, and bills, and promises to pay, and lawyer-like japan boxes, with many a noble name written thereon in large white capitals—"making ruin pompous"—all these sepulchres of departed patrimonies veneered in rosewood that gleamed with French polish, and blazed with ormolu. There was a coquetry, an air of *petit-maître*, so diffused over the whole room, that you could not, for the life of you, recollect you were with an usurer! Plutus wore the aspect of his enemy Cupid; and how realise your idea of Harpagon in that Baron, with his easy French "*Mon cher*," and his white warm hands that pressed yours so genially, and his dress so exquisite, even at the earliest morn? No man ever yet saw that Baron in a dressing-gown and slippers! As one fancies some feudal baron of old (not half so terrible) everlastingly clad in mail, so all one's notions of this grand marauder of civilisation were inseparably associated with varnished boots and a camelia in the button-hole.

"And this is all that he does for you!" cried the Baron, pressing together the points of his ten taper fingers. "Had he but let you conclude your career at Oxford, I have heard enough of your scholarship to know that you would have taken high honours—been secure of a fellowship—have betaken yourself with content to a slow and laborious profession, and prepared yourself to die on the woolsack."

"He proposes to me now to return to Oxford," said Randal. "It is not too late!"

"Yes it is," said the Baron. "Neither individuals nor nations ever go back of their own accord. There must be an earthquake before a river recedes to its source."

"You speak well," answered Randal, "and I cannot gainsay you. But now!"

"Ah, the *now* is the grand question in life—the *then* is obsolete, gone by—out of fashion, and *now*, *mon cher*, you come to ask my advice?"

"No, Baron, I come to ask your explanation."

"Of what?"

"I want to know why you spoke to me of Mr Egerton's ruin; why you spoke to me of the lands to be sold by Mr Thornhill; and why you spoke to me of Count Peschiera. You touched on each of these points within ten minutes—you omitted to indicate what link can connect them."

"By Jove," said the Baron, rising, and with more admiration in his face than you could have conceived that face, so smiling and so cynical, could exhibit—"by Jove, Randal Leslie, but your shrewdness is wonderful. You really are the first young man of your day; and I will 'help you,' as I helped Audley Egerton. Perhaps you will be more grateful."

Randal thought of Egerton's ruin. The parallel implied by the Baron did not suggest to him the rare enthusiasm of gratitude. However, he merely said, "Pray, proceed—I listen to you with interest."

"As for politics, then," said the Baron, "we will discuss that topic later. I am waiting myself to see how these new men get on. The first consideration is for your private fortunes. You should buy this ancient Leslie property — Rood and Dulmansberry — only £20,000 down; the rest may remain on mortgage for ever—or at least till I find you a rich wife, as in fact I did for Egerton. Thornhill wants the £20,000 now,—wants them very much."

"And where," said Randal, with an iron smile, "are the £20,000 you ascribe to me to come from?"

"Ten thousand shall come to you the day Count Peschiera marries the daughter of his kinsman with your help and aid—the remaining ten thousand I will lend you. No scruple—I shall hazard nothing—the estates will bear that additional burden. What say you—shall it be so?"

"Ten thousand pounds from Count Peschiera!" said Randal, breathing hard. "You cannot be serious!

Such a sum—for what ?—for a mere piece of information ? How otherwise can I aid him ? There must be trick and deception intended here."

" My dear fellow," answered Levy, " I will give you a hint. There is such a thing in life as being over-suspicious. If you have a fault, it is that. The information you allude to is, of course, the first assistance you are to give. Perhaps more may be needed—perhaps not. Of that you will judge yourself, since the £10,000 are contingent on the marriage aforesaid."

" Over-suspicious or not," answered Randal, " the amount of the sum is too improbable, and the security too bad, for me to listen to this proposition, even if I could descend to——"

" Stop, *mon cher*. Business first, scruples afterwards. The security too bad—what security ? "

" The word of Count di Peschiera."

" He has nothing to do with it—he need know nothing about it. 'Tis my word you doubt. I am your security."

Randal thought of that dry witticism in Gibbon. " Abu Rafe says he will be witness for this fact, but who will be witness for Abu Rafe ?" but he remained silent, only fixing on Levy those dark observant eyes, with their contracted wary pupils.

" The fact is simply this," resumed Levy : " Count di Peschiera has promised to pay his sister a dowry of £20,000, in case he has the money to spare. He can only have it to spare by the marriage we are discussing. On my part, as I manage his affairs in England for him, I have promised that, for the said sum of £20,000, I will guarantee the expenses in the way of that marriage, and settle with Madame di Negra. Now, though Peschiera is a very liberal, warm-hearted fellow, I don't say that he would have named so large a sum for his sister's dowry, if in strict truth he did not owe it to her. It is the amount of her own fortune, which, by some arrangements with her late husband, not exactly legal, he possessed himself of. If Madame di Negra went to law with him for it, she could get it back. I have explained this to him; and, in short, you now understand why the sum is thus assessed. But I have bought up Madame di Negra's debts. I have bought up young Hazeldean's (for we must make a match between these two a part of our arrangements), I shall present to Peschiera, and to these excellent young persons, an account that will absorb the whole £20,000. That sum will come into my hands. If I settle the claims against them for half the money, which, making myself the sole creditor, I have the right to do, the moiety will remain. And if I choose to give it to you in return for the services which provide Peschiera with a princely fortune—discharge the debts of his sister—and secure her a husband in my promising young client Mr Hazeldean, that is my look-out—all parties are satisfied, and no one need ever be the wiser. The sum is large, no doubt; it answers to me to give it to you; does it answer to you to receive it?"

Randal was greatly agitated; but, vile as he was, and systematically as in thought he had brought himself to regard others merely as they could be made subservient to his own interest, still, with all who have not hardened themselves in actual crime, there is a wide distinction between the thought and the act; and though, in the exercise of ingenuity and cunning, he would have had few scruples in that moral swindling which is mildly called " outwitting another," yet thus nakedly and openly to accept a bribe for a deed of treachery towards the poor Italian who had so generously trusted him—he recoiled. He was nerving himself to refuse, when Levy, opening his pocket-book, glanced over the memoranda therein, and said, as to himself, "Rood Manor—Dulmansberry, sold to the Thornhills by Sir Gilbert Leslie, knight of the shire; estimated present net rental £2,250, 7s. 0d. It is the greatest bargain I ever knew. And with this estate in hand, and your talents, Leslie, I don't see why you should not rise higher than Audley Egerton. He was poorer than you once!"

The old Leslie lands—a positive stake in the country—the restoration of the fallen family; and on the other hand, either long drudgery at the bar,—a scanty allowance on Egerton's bounty—his sister wasting her youth at slovenly, dismal Rood—Oliver debased into a boor!—or a mendicant's dependence on the contemptuous pity of Harley L'Estrange—Harley, who had refused his hand to him—Harley, who perhaps would become the husband of Violante! Rage seized him as these contrasting pictures rose before his view.

He walked to and fro in disorder, striving to recollect his thoughts, and reduce himself from the passions of the human heart into the mere mechanism of calculating intellect. "I cannot conceive," said he, abruptly, "why you should tempt me thus—what interest it is to you!"

Baron Levy smiled, and put up his pocket-book. He saw from that moment that the victory was gained.

"My dear boy," said he, with the most agreeable *bonhomie*, "it is very natural that you should think a man would have a personal interest in whatever he does for another. I believe that view of human nature is called utilitarian philosophy, and is much in fashion at present. Let me try and explain to you. In this affair I shan't injure myself. True, you will say, if I settle claims, which amount to £20,000, for £10,000, I might put the surplus into my own pocket instead of yours. Agreed. But I shall not get the £20,000, nor repay myself Madame di Negra's debts (whatever I may do as to Hazeldean's), unless the Count gets this heiress. You can help in this. I want you; and I don't think I could get you by a less offer than I make. I shall soon pay myself back the £10,000 if the Count get hold of the lady and her fortune. Brief—I see my way here to my own interests. Do you want more reasons—you shall have them. I am now a very rich man. How have I become so? Through attaching myself from the first to persons of expectations, whether from fortune or talent. I have made connections in society, and society has enriched me. I have still a passion for making money. *Que voulez-vous?* It is my profession, my hobby. It will be useful to me in a thousand ways, to secure as a friend a young man who will have influence with other young men, heirs to something better than Rood Hall. You may succeed in public life. A man in public life may attain to the knowledge of state secrets that are very profitable to one who dabbles a little in the Funds. We can perhaps hereafter do business together that may put yourself in a way of clearing off all mortgages on these estates—on the encumbered possession of which I shall soon congratulate you. You see I am frank; 'tis the only way of coming to the point with so clever a fellow as you. And now, since the less we rake up the mud in a pond from which we have resolved to drink, the better, let us dismiss all other thoughts but that of securing our end. Will you tell Peschiera where the young lady is, or shall I? Better do it yourself; reason enough for it, that he has confided to you his hope, and asked you to help him; why should not you? Not a word to him about our little arrangement; he need never know it. You need never be troubled." Levy rang the bell: " Order my carriage round."

Randal made no objection. He was death-like pale, but there was a sinister expression of firmness on his thin bloodless lips.

" The next point," Levy resumed, " is to hasten the match between Frank and the fair widow. How does that stand?"

"She will not see me, nor receive him."

"Oh, learn why! And if you find on either side there is a hitch, just let me know; I will soon remove it."

"Has Hazeldean consented to the post-obit?"

"Not yet; I have not pressed it; I wait the right moment, if necessary."

"It will be necessary."

"Ah, you wish it. It shall be so."

Randal Leslie again paced the room, and after a silent self-commune, came up close to the Baron, and said—

"Look you, sir, I am poor and ambitious: you have tempted me at the right moment, and with the right inducement. I succumb. But what guarantee have I that this money will be paid—these estates made mine upon the condition stipulated?"

"Before anything is settled," replied the Baron, "go and ask my character of any of our young friends, Borrowell, Spendquick—whom you please; you will hear me abused, of course; but they will all say this of me, that when I pass my word, I keep it. If I say, '*Mon cher*, you shall have the money,' a man has it; if I say, 'I renew your bill for six months,' it is renewed. 'Tis my way of doing business. In all cases my word is my bond. In this case, where no writing can pass between us, my only bond must be my word. Go, then, make your mind clear as to your security, and come here and dine at eight. We will call on Peschiera afterwards."

"Yes," said Randal, "I will at all events take the day to consider. Meanwhile, I say this—I do not disguise from myself the nature of the proposed transaction, but what I have once resolved I go through with. My sole vindication to myself is, that if I play here with a false die, it will be for a stake so grand, as, once won, the magnitude of the prize will cancel the ignominy of the play. It is not this sum of money for which I sell myself—it is for what that sum will aid me to achieve. And in the marriage of young Hazeldean with the Italian woman, I have another, and, it may be, a larger interest. I have slept on it lately—I wake to it now. Insure that marriage, obtain the post-obit from Hazeldean, and whatever the issue of the more direct scheme for which you seek my services, rely on my gratitude, and believe that you will have put me in the way to render gratitude of avail. At eight I will be with you."

Randal left the room.

The Baron sat thoughtful. "It is true," said he to himself, "this young man is the next of kin to the Hazeldean estate, if Frank displease his father sufficiently to lose his inheritance; that must be the clever boy's design. Well, in the long run, I should make as much, or more, out of him than out of the spendthrift Frank. Frank's faults are those of youth. He will reform and retrench. But *this* man! No, I shall have *him* for life. And should he fail in this project, and have but this encumbered property—a landed proprietor mortgaged up to his ears—why, he is my slave, and I can foreclose when I wish, or if he prove useless;—no, I risk nothing. And if I did—if I lost ten thousand pounds—what then? I can afford it for revenge!—afford it for the luxury of leaving Audley Egerton alone with penury and ruin, deserted, in his hour of need, by the pensioner of his bounty—as he will be by the last friend of his youth—when it so pleases me—me whom he has called 'scoundrel!' and whom he——" Levy's soliloquy halted there, for the servant entered to announce the carriage. And the Baron hurried his hand over his features, as if to sweep away all trace of the passions that distorted their smiling effrontery. And so, as he took up his cane and gloves, and glanced at the glass, the face of the fashionable usurer was once more as varnished as his boots.

CHAPTER XIX.

When a clever man resolves on a villanous action, he hastens, by the exercise of his cleverness, to get rid of the sense of his villany. With more than his usual alertness, Randal employed the next hour or two in ascertaining how far Baron Levy merited the character he boasted, and how far his word might be his bond. He repaired to young men whom he esteemed better judges on these points than Spendquick and Borrowell—young men who resembled the Merry Monarch, inasmuch as

> "They never said a foolish thing,
> And never did a wise one."

There are many such young men about town—sharp and able in all affairs except their own. No one knows the world better, nor judges of character more truly, than your half-beggared *roué*. From all these Baron Levy obtained much the same testimonials: he was ridiculed as a would-be dandy, but respected as a very responsible man of business, and rather liked as a friendly, accommodating species of the Sir Epicure Mammon, who very often did what were thought handsome, liberal things; and, "in short," said one of these experienced referees, "he is the best fellow going—for a money-lender! You may always rely on what he promises, and he is generally very forbearing and indulgent to *us* of good society; perhaps for the same reason that our tailors are;—to send one of us to prison would hurt his custom. His foible is to be thought a gentleman. I believe, much as I suppose he loves money, he would give up half his fortune rather than do anything for which we could cut him. He allows a pension of three hundred a-year to Lord S——. True, he was his man of business for twenty years, and before then S—— was rather a prudent fellow, and had fifteen thousand a-year. He has helped on, too, many a clever young man;—the best borough-monger you ever knew. He likes having friends in Parliament. In fact, of course, he is a rogue; but if one wants a rogue, one can't find a pleasanter. I should like to see him on the French stage—a prosperous *Macaire;* Le Maître could hit him off to the life."

From information in these more fashionable quarters, gleaned with his usual tact, Randal turned to a source less elevated, but to which he attached more importance. Dick Avenel associated with the Baron—Dick Avenel must be in his clutches. Now Randal did justice to that gentleman's practical shrewdness. Moreover, Avenel was by profession a man of business. He must know more of Levy than these men of pleasure could; and, as he was a plain-spoken person, and evidently honest, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, Randal did not doubt that out of Dick Avenel he should get the truth.

On arriving in Eton Square, and asking for Mr Avenel, Randal was at once ushered into the drawing-room. The apartment was not in such good, solid, mercantile taste as had characterised Avenel's more humble bachelor's residence at Screwstown. The taste now was the Honourable Mrs Avenel's; and, truth to say, no taste could be worse. Furniture of all epochs heterogeneously clumped together;—here a sofa *à la renaissance* in *Gobelin*—there a rosewood console from Gillow—a tall mock-Elizabethan chair in black oak, by the side of a modern Florentine table of mosaic marbles. All kinds of colours in the room, and all at war with each other. Very bad copies of the best-known pictures in the world, in the most gaudy frames, and impudently labelled by the names of their murdered originals—"Raffaele," "Corregio," "Titian," "Sebastian del Piombo." Nevertheless, there had been plenty of money spent, and there was plenty to show for it. Mrs Avenel was seated on her sofa *à la renaissance*, with one of her children at her feet, who was employed in reading a new Annual in crimson silk binding. Mrs Avenel was in an attitude as if sitting for her portrait.

Polite society is most capricious in its adoptions or rejections. You see many a vulgar person firmly established in the *beau monde;* others, with very good pretensions as to birth, fortune, &c., either rigorously excluded, or only permitted a peep over the pales.

The Honourable Mrs Avenel belonged to families unquestionably noble, both by her own descent and by her first marriage; and if poverty had kept her down in her earlier career, she now, at least, did not want wealth to back her pretensions. Nevertheless, all the dispensers of fashion concurred in refusing their support to the Honourable Mrs Avenel. One might suppose it was solely on account of her plebeian husband; but indeed it was not so. Many a woman of high family can marry a low-born man not so presentable as Avenel, and, by the help of his money, get the fine world at her feet. But Mrs Avenel had not that art. She was still a very handsome showy woman; and as for dress, no duchess could be more extravagant. Yet these very circumstances had perhaps gone against her ambition; for your quiet little plain woman, provoking no envy, slips into the *coteries*, when a handsome flaunting lady—who, once seen in your drawing-room, can be no more overlooked than a scarlet poppy amidst a violet bed—is pretty sure to be weeded out as ruthlessly as a poppy would be in a similar position.

Mr Avenel was sitting by the fire, rather moodily, his hands in his pockets, and whistling to himself. To say truth, that active mind of his was very much bored in London, at least during the fore part of the day. He hailed Randal's entrance with a smile of relief, and rising and posting himself before the fire—a coat-tail under each arm—he scarcely allowed Randal to shake hands with Mrs Avenel, and pat the child on the head, murmuring, "Beautiful creature." (Randal was ever civil to children—that sort of wolf in sheep's clothing always is—don't be taken in, O you foolish young mothers!) Dick, I say, scarcely allowed his visitor these preliminary courtesies, before he plunged far beyond depth of wife and child, into the political ocean. "Things now were coming right—a vile oligarchy was to be destroyed. British respectability and British talent were to have fair play." To have heard him, you would have thought the day fixed for the millennium! "And what is more," said Avenel, bringing down the fist of his right hand upon the palm of his left, "if there is to be a new parliament, we must have new men—not worn-out old brooms that never sweep clean, but men who understand how to govern the country, sir. I INTEND TO COME IN MYSELF!"

"Yes," said Mrs Avenel, hooking in a word at last, "I am sure, Mr Leslie, you will think I did right. I persuaded Mr Avenel that, with his talents and property, he ought, for the sake of his country, to make a sacrifice; and then you know his opinions now are all the fashion, Mr Leslie; formerly they would have been called shocking and vulgar!"

Thus saying, she looked with fond pride at Dick's comely face, which at that moment, however, was all scowl and frown. I must do justice to Mrs Avenel; she was a weak, silly woman in some things, and a cunning one in others; but she was a good wife, as wives go. Scotchwomen generally are.

"Bother!" said Dick; "what do women know about politics? I wish you'd mind the child—it is crumpling up, and playing almighty smash with that flim-flam book, which cost me one pound one."

Mrs Avenel submissively bowed her head, and removed the Annual from the hands of the young destructive; the destructive set up a squall, as destructives usually do when they don't have their own way. Dick clapped his hand to his ears. "Whe-e-ew, I can't stand this; come and take a walk, Leslie: I want stretching!" He stretched himself as he spoke, first half-way up to the ceiling, and then fairly out of the room.

Randal, with his May Fair manner, turned towards Mrs Avenel as if to apologise for her husband and himself.

"Poor Richard!" said she, "he is in one of his humours—all men have them. Come and see me again soon. When does Almack's open?"

"Nay, I ought to ask you that question, you who know everything that goes on in our set," said the young serpent. Any tree planted in "our set," if it had been but a crab-tree, would have tempted Mr Avenel's Eve to jump at its boughs.

"*Are* you coming, there?" cried Dick, from the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER XX.

"I HAVE just been at our friend Levy's," said Randal, when he and Dick were outside the street-door. "He, like you, is full of politics—pleasant man—for the business he is said to do."

"Well," said Dick, slowly, "I suppose he *is* pleasant, but make the best of it—and still——"

"Still what, my dear Avenel?" (Randal here for the first time discarded the formal Mister.)

MR AVENEL.—"Still the thing itself is not pleasant."

RANDAL (with his soft hollow laugh).—"You mean borrowing money upon more than five per cent."

"Oh, curse the per-centage. I agree with Bentham on the Usury Laws—no shackles in trade for me, whether in money or anything else. That's not it. But when one owes a fellow money even at two per cent, and 'tis not convenient to pay him, why, somehow or other, it makes one feel small; it takes the British Liberty out of a man!"

"I should have thought you more likely to lend money than to borrow it."

"Well, I guess you are right there, as a general rule.

But I tell you what it is, sir; there is too great a mania for competition getting up in this old rotten country of ours. I am as liberal as most men. I like competition to a certain extent, but there is too much of it, sir—too much of it."

Randal looked sad and convinced. But if Leonard had heard Dick Avenel, what would have been his amaze? Dick Avenel rail against competition! Think there could be too much of it! Of course, "heaven and earth are coming together," said the spider, when the housemaid's broom invaded its cobweb. Dick was all for sweeping away other cobwebs; but he certainly thought heaven and earth coming together when he saw a great Turk's-head besom poked up at his own.

Mr Avenel, in his genius for speculation and improvement, had established a factory at Screwstown, the first which had ever eclipsed the church spire with its Titanic chimney. It succeeded well at first. Mr Avenel transferred to this speculation nearly all his capital. "Nothing," quoth he, "paid such an interest. Manchester was getting worn out—time to show what Screwstown could do. Nothing like competition." But by-and-by a still greater capitalist than Dick Avenel, finding out that Screwstown was at the mouth of a coal-mine, and that Dick's profits were great, erected a still uglier edifice, with a still taller chimney. And having been brought up to the business, and making his residence in the town, while Dick employed a foreman and flourished in London, this infamous competitor so managed, first to share, and then gradually to sequester, the profits which Dick had hitherto monopolised, that no wonder Mr Avenel thought competition should have its limits. "The tongue touches where the tooth aches," as Dr Riccabocca would tell us. By little and little our juvenile Talleyrand (I beg the elder great man's pardon) wormed out from Dick this grievance, and in the grievance discovered the origin of Dick's connection with the money-lender.

"But Levy," said Avenel, candidly, "is a decentish chap in his way—friendly too. Mrs A. finds him useful; brings some of your young highflyers to her *soirées.* To be sure, they don't dance—stand all in a row at the door, like mutes at a funeral. Not but what they have been uncommon civil to me lately—Spendquick particularly. By-the-by, I dine with him to-morrow. The aristocracy are behindhand—not smart, sir—not up to the mark; but when a man knows how to take 'em, they beat the New Yorkers in good manners. I'll say that for them. I have no prejudice."

"I never saw a man with less; no prejudice even against Levy."

"No, not a bit of it! Every one says he's a Jew; he says he's not. I don't care a button what he is. His money is English—that's enough for any man of a liberal turn of mind. His charges, too, are moderate. To be sure, he knows I shall pay them; only what I don't like in him is a sort of way he has of *mon-cher*-ing and my good-fellow-ing one, to do things quite out of the natural way of that sort of business. He knows I have got Parliamentary influence. I could return a couple of members for Screwstown, and one, or perhaps two, for Lansmere, where I have of late been cooking up an interest; and he dictates to—no, not *dictates*—but tries to *humbug* me into putting in his own men. However, in one respect we are likely to agree. He says you want to come into Parliament. You seem a smart young fellow; but you must throw over that stiff red-tapist of yours, and go with Public Opinion, and—Myself."

"You are very kind, Avenel; perhaps when we come to compare opinions, we may find that we agree entirely. Still, in Egerton's present position, delicacy to him—however, we'll not discuss that now. But you really think I might come in for Lansmere—against the L'Estrange interest, too, which must be strong there?"

"It *was* very strong, but I've smashed it, I calculate."

"Would a contest there cost very much?"

"Well, I guess you must come down with the ready. But, as you say, time enough to discuss that when you have squared your account with 'delicacy;' come to me then, and we'll go into it."

Randal, having now squeezed his orange dry, had no desire to wast his time in brushing up the rind with his coat-sleeve, so he unhooked his arm from Avenel's, and, looking at his watch, discovered he should be just in time for an appointment of the most urgent business—hailed a cab, and drove off.

Dick looked hipped and disconsolate at being left alone; he yawned very loud, to the astonishment of three prim old-maiden Belgravians who were passing that way; and then his mind began to turn towards his factory at Screwstown, which had led to his connection with the Baron; and he thought over a letter he had received from his foreman that morning, informing him that it was rumoured at Screwstown that Mr Dyce, his rival, was about to have new machinery on an improved principle; and that Mr Dyce had already gone up to town, it was supposed with the intention of concluding a purchase for a patent discovery to be applied to the new machinery, and which that gentleman had publicly declared, in the corn-market, "would shut up Mr Avenel's factory before the year was out." As this menacing epistle recurred to him, Dick felt his desire to yawn incontinently checked. His brow grew very dark, and he walked, with restless strides, on and on, till he found himself in the Strand. He then got into an omnibus, and proceeded to the city, wherein he spent the rest of the day, looking over machines and foundries, and trying in vain to find out what diabolical invention the over-competition of Mr Dyce had got hold of. "If," said Dick Avenel to himself, as he returned fretfully homeward—"If a man like me, who has done so much for British industry and go-ahead principles, is to be catawampously champed up by a mercenary selfish cormorant of a capitalist like that interloping blockhead in drab breeches, Tom Dyce, all I can say is, that the sooner this cursed old country goes to the dogs, the better pleased I shall be. I wash my hands of it."

CHAPTER XXI.

Randal's mind was made up. All he had learned in regard to Levy had confirmed his resolves or dissipated his scruples. He had started from the improbability that Peschiera would offer, and the still greater improbability that Peschiera would pay him, ten thousand pounds for such information or aid as he could bestow in furthering the Count's object. But when Levy took such proposals entirely on himself, the main question to Randal became this—Could it be Levy's interest to make so considerable a sacrifice? Had the Baron implied only friendly sentiments as his motives, Randal would have felt sure he was to be taken in; but the usurer's frank assurance that it would answer to him in the long-run to concede to Randal terms so advantageous, altered the case, and led our young philosopher to look at the affair with calm contemplative eyes. Was it sufficiently obvious that Levy counted on an adequate return? Might he calculate on reaping help by the bushel if he sowed it by the handful? The result of Randal's cogitations was, that the Baron might fairly deem himself no wasteful sower. In the first place, it was clear that Levy, not without reasonable ground, believed that he could soon replace, with exceeding good interest, any sum he might advance to Randal, out of the wealth which Randal's prompt information might bestow on Levy's client, the Count; and, secondly, Randal's self-esteem was immense, and could he but succeed in securing a pecuniary independence on the instant, to free him from the slow drudgery of the bar, or from a precarious reliance on Audley Egerton, as a politician out of power, his convictions of rapid triumph in public life were as strong as if whispered by an angel, or promised by a fiend. On such triumphs, with all the social position they would secure, Levy might well calculate for repayment by a thousand indirect channels. Randal's sagacity detected that, through all the good-natured or liberal actions ascribed to the usurer, Levy had steadily pursued his own interests,—he saw that Levy meant to get him into his power, and use his abilities as instruments for digging new mines, in which Baron Levy would claim the right of large royalties. But at that thought Randal's pale lip curled disdainfully; he confided too much in his own powers not to think that he could elude the grasp of the usurer, whenever it suited him to do so. Thus, on a survey, all conscience hushed itself,—his mind rushed buoyantly on to anticipations of the future. He saw the hereditary estates regained—no matter how mortgaged,—for the moment still his own—legally his own,—yielding for the present what would suffice for competence to one of few wants, and freeing his name from that title of Adventurer, which is so prodigally given in rich old countries to those who have no estates but their brains. He thought of Violante but as the civilised trader thinks of a trifling coin, of a glass bead, which he exchanges with some barbarian for gold dust;—he thought of Frank Hazeldean married to the foreign woman of beggared means, and repute that had known the breath of scandal,—married, and living on post-obit instalments of the Casino property;—he thought of the poor Squire's resentment,—his avarice swept from the lands annexed to Rood on to the broad fields of Hazeldean;—he thought of Avenel, of Lansmere, of Parliament;—with one hand he grasped fortune, with the next power. "And yet I entered on life with no patrimony (save a ruined hall and a barren waste)—no patrimony but knowledge. I have but turned knowledge from books to men; for books may give fame after death, but men give us power in life." And all the while he thus ruminated, his act was speeding his purpose. Though it was but in a miserable hack cab that he erected airy scaffoldings round airy castles, still the miserable hack cab was flying fast to secure the first foot of solid ground whereon to transfer the mental plan of the architect to foundations of positive slime and clay. The cab stopped at the door of Lord Lansmere's house. Randal had suspected Violante to be there; he resolved to ascertain. Randal descended from his vehicle, and rang the bell. The lodge-keeper opened the great wooden gates.

"I have called to see the young lady staying here—the foreign young lady."

Lady Lansmere had been too confident of the security of her roof to condescend to give any orders to her servants with regard to her guest, and the lodge-keeper answered directly,—

"At home, I believe, sir. I rather think she is in the garden with my lady."

"I see," said Randal. And he did see the form of Violante at a distance. "But, since she is walking, I will not disturb her at present. I will call another day."

The lodge-keeper bowed respectfully, Randal jumped into his cab—"To Curzon Street—quick!"

CHAPTER XXII.

Harley had made one notable oversight in that appeal to Beatrice's better and gentler nature, which he intrusted to the advocacy of Leonard,—a scheme in itself very characteristic of Harley's romantic temper, and either wise or foolish, according as his indulgent theory of human idiosyncrasies in general, and of those peculiar to Beatrice di Negra in especial, was the dream of an enthusiast, or the inductive conclusion of a sound philosopher.

Harley had warned Leonard not to fall in love with the Italian,—he had forgotten to warn the Italian not to fall in love with Leonard; nor had he ever anticipated the probability of that event. This is not to be very much wondered at; for if there be anything on which the most sensible men are dull-eyed, where those eyes are not lighted by jealousy, it is as to the probabilities of another male creature being beloved. All, the least vain of the whiskered gender, think it prudent to guard themselves against being too irresistible to the fair sex; and each says of his friend, "Good fellow enough, but the last man for *that* woman to fall in love with!"

But certainly there appeared on the surface more than ordinary cause for Harley's blindness in the special instance of Leonard.

Whatever Beatrice's better qualities, she was generally esteemed worldly and ambitious. She was pinched in circumstances—she was luxurious and extravagant: how was it likely that she could distinguish any aspirant of the humble birth and fortunes of the young peasant author? As a coquette, she might try to win his admiration, and attract his fancy; but her own heart would surely be guarded in the triple mail of pride, poverty, and the conventional opinions of the world in which she lived. Had Harley thought it possible that Madame di Negra could stoop below her station, and love, not wisely, but too well, he would rather have thought that the object would be some brilliant adventurer of fashion,—some one who could turn against herself all the arts of deliberate fascination, and all the experience bestowed by frequent conquest. One so simple as Leonard—so young and so new! Harley L'Estrange would have smiled at himself, if the idea of that image subjugating the ambitious woman to the disinterested love of a village maid, had once crossed his mind. Nevertheless, so it was, and precisely from those causes which would have seemed to Harley to forbid the weakness.

It *was* that fresh, pure heart,—it was that simple, earnest sweetness,—it was that contrast in look, in tone, in sentiment, and in reasonings, to all that had jaded and disgusted her in the circle of her admirers,—it was all this that captivated Beatrice at the first interview with Leonard. Here was what she had confessed to the sceptical Randal she had dreamed and sighed for. Her earliest youth had passed into abhorrent marriage, without the soft, innocent crisis of human life—virgin love. Many a wooer might have touched her vanity, pleased her fancy, excited her ambition—her heart had never been awakened: it woke now. The world, and the years that the world had wasted, seemed to fleet away as a cloud. She was as if restored to the blush and the sigh of youth—the youth of the Italian maid. As in the restoration of our golden age is the spell of poetry with us all, so such was the spell of the poet himself on her.

Oh, how exquisite was that brief episode in the life of the woman palled with the "hack sights and sounds" of worldly life! How strangely happy were those hours, when, lured on by her silent sympathy, the young scholar spoke of his early struggles between circumstance and impulse, musing amidst the flowers, and hearkening to the fountain; or of his wanderings in the desolate, lamp-lit streets, while the vision of Chatterton's glittering eyes shone dread through the friendless shadows. And as he spoke, whether of his hopes or his fears, her looks dwelt fondly on the young face, that varied between pride and sadness—pride ever so gentle, and sadness ever so nobly touching. She was never weary of gazing on that brow, with its quiet power; but her lids dropped before those eyes, with their serene, unfathomable passion. She felt, as they haunted her, what a deep and holy thing love in such souls must be. Leonard never spoke to her of Helen—that reserve every reader can comprehend. To natures like his, first love is a mystery; to confide it is to profane. But he fulfilled his commission of interesting her in the exile and his daughter. And his description of them brought tears to her eyes. She inly resolved not to aid Peschiera in his designs on Violante. She forgot for the moment that her own fortune was to depend on the success of those designs.—Levy had arranged so that she was not reminded of her poverty by creditors—she knew not how; she knew nothing of business. She gave herself up to the delight of the present hour, and to vague prospects of a future, associated with that young image—with that face of a guardian angel that she saw before her, fairest in the moments of absence: for in those moments came the life of fairy-land, when we shut our eyes on the world, and see through the haze of golden reverie. Dangerous, indeed, to Leonard would have been the soft society of Beatrice di Negra, had not his heart been wholly devoted to one object, and had not his ideal of woman been from that object one sole and indivisible reflection. But Beatrice guessed not this barrier between herself and him. Amidst the shadows that he conjured up from his past life, she beheld no rival form. She saw him lonely in the world as she was herself. And in his lowly birth, his youth, in the freedom from presumption which characterised him in all things (save that confidence in his intellectual destinies which is the essential attribute of genius), she but grew the bolder by the belief that, even if he loved her, he would not dare to hazard the avowal.

And thus, one day, yielding, as she had ever been wont to yield, to the impulse of her quick Italian heart —how she never remembered—in what words she could never recall—she spoke—she owned her love—she pleaded, with tears and blushes, for love in return. All that passed was to her as a dream—a dream from which she woke with a fierce sense of agony, of humiliation—woke as the woman "scorned." No matter how gratefully, how tenderly Leonard had replied—the reply was refusal. For the first time she learned she had a rival; that all he could give of love was long since, from his boyhood, given to another. For the first time in her life that ardent nature knew jealousy, its torturing stings, its thirst for vengeance, its tempest of loving hate. But, to outward appearance, silent and cold she stood as marble. Words that sought to soothe fell on her ear unheeded: they were drowned by the storm within. Pride was the first feeling which dominated the warring elements that raged in her soul. She tore her hand from that which clasped hers with so loyal a respect. She could have spurned the form that knelt at her feet, not for love, but for pardon. She pointed to the door with the gesture of an insulted queen. She knew no more till she was alone. Then came that rapid flash of conjecture peculiar to the storms of jealousy; that which seems to single from all nature the one object to dread and to destroy; the conjecture so often false; yet received at once by our convictions as the revelation of instinctive truth. He to whom she had humbled herself loved another; whom but Violante?—whom else, young and beautiful, had he named in the record of his life?—None! And he had sought to interest her, Beatrice di Negra, in the object of his love;—hinted at dangers, which Beatrice knew too well;—implied trust in Beatrice's will to protect. Blind fool that she had been! This, then, was the reason why he had come, day after day, to Beatrice's house; this was the charm that had drawn him thither; this—she pressed her hands to her burning temples, as if to stop the torture of thought. Suddenly a voice was heard below, the door opened, and Randal Leslie entered.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Punctually at eight o'clock that evening, Baron Levy welcomed the new ally he had secured. The pair dined *en tête-à-tête*, discussing general matters till the servants left them to their wine. Then said the Baron, rising and stirring the fire—then said the Baron, briefly and significantly—

"Well!"

"As regards the property you spoke of," answered Randal, "I am willing to purchase it on the terms you name. The only point that perplexes me is how to account to Audley Egerton, to my parents, to the world, for the power of purchasing it."

"True," said the Baron, without even a smile at the ingenious and truly Greek manner in which Randal had contrived to denote his meaning, and conceal the ugliness of it—"true, we must think of that. If we could manage to conceal the real name of the purchaser for a year or so—it might be easy—you may be supposed to have speculated in the Funds; or Egerton may die, and people may believe that he had secured to you something handsome from the ruins of his fortune."

"Little chance of Egerton's dying."

"Humph!" said the Baron. "However, this is a mere detail, reserved for consideration. You can now tell us where the young lady is?"

"Certainly. I could not this morning—I can now. I will go with you to the Count. Meanwhile, I have seen Madame di Negra; she will accept Frank Hazeldean if he will but offer himself at once."

"Will he not?"

"No! I have been to him. He is overjoyed at my representations, but considers it his duty to ask the consent of his parents. Of course they will not give it; and if there be delay, she will retract. She is under the influence of passions, on the duration of which there is no reliance."

"What passions? Love?"

"Love; but not for Hazeldean. The passions that bring her to accept his hand are pique and jealousy. She believes, in a word, that one, who seems to have gained the mastery over her affections with a strange suddenness, is but blind to her charms because dazzled by Violante's. She is prepared to aid in all that can give her rival to Peschiera; and yet, such is the inconsistency of woman," added the young philosopher, with a shrug of the shoulders, "that she is also prepared to lose all chance of securing him she loves, by bestowing herself on another!"

"Woman, indeed, all over!" said the Baron, tapping the snuff-box (Louis Quinze), and regaling his nostrils with a scornful pinch. "But who is the man whom the fair Beatrice has thus honoured? Superb creature! I had some idea of her myself when I bought up her debts; but it might have embarrassed me, in more general plans, as regards the Count. All for the best. Who's the man? Not Lord L'Estrange?"

"I do not think it is he; but I have not yet ascertained. I have told you all I know. I found her in a state so excited, so unlike herself, that I had no little difficulty in soothing her into confidence so far. I could not venture more."

"And she will accept Frank?"

"Had he offered to-day she would have accepted him!"

"It may be a great help to your fortunes, *mon cher*, if Frank Hazeldean marry this lady without his father's consent. Perhaps he may be disinherited. You are next of kin."

"How do you know that?" asked Randal, sullenly.

"It is my business to know all about the chances and connections of any one with whom I do money matters. I do money matters with young Mr Hazeldean; so I know that the Hazeldean property is not entailed; and as the Squire's half-brother has no Hazeldean blood in him, you have excellent expectations."

"Did Frank tell you I was next of kin?"

"I rather think so; but I am sure *you* did."

"I—when?"

"When you told me how important it was to you that Frank should marry Madame di Negra. *Peste! mon cher*, do you think I'm a blockhead?"

"Well, Baron, Frank is of age, and can marry to please himself. You implied to me that you could help him in this."

"I will try. See that he call at Madame di Negra's to-morrow, at two precisely."

"I would rather keep clear of all apparent interference in this matter. Will you not arrange that he call on her? And do not forget to entangle him in a *post obit*."

"Leave it to me. Any more wine? No;—then let us go to the Count's."

CHAPTER XXIV.

The next morning Frank Hazeldean was sitting over his solitary breakfast-table. It was long past noon. The young man had risen early, it is true, to attend his military duties, but he had contracted the habit of breakfasting late. One's appetite does not come early when one lives in London, and never goes to bed before daybreak.

There was nothing very luxurious or effeminate about Frank's rooms, though they were in a very dear street, and he paid a monstrous high price for them. Still, to a practised eye, they betrayed an inmate who can get through his money, and make very little show for it. The walls were covered with coloured prints of racers, and steeple chases, interspersed with the portraits of opera-dancers—all smirk and caper. Then there was a semicircular recess covered with red cloth, and fitted up for smoking, as you might perceive by sundry stands full of Turkish pipes in cherry-stick and jessamine, with amber mouthpieces; while a great serpent hookah, from which Frank could no more have smoked than he could have smoked out of the head of a boa-constrictor, coiled itself up on the floor; over the chimneypiece was a collection of Moorish arms. What use on earth, ataghan and scimitar, and damasquined pistols, that would not carry straight three yards, could be to an officer in His Majesty's Guards, is more than I can conjecture, or even Frank satisfactorily explain. I have strong suspicions that this valuable arsenal passed to Frank in part payment of a bill to be discounted. At all events, if so, it was an improvement on the bear that he had sold to the hairdresser. No books were to be seen anywhere, except a Court Guide, a Racing Calendar, an Army List, a Sporting Magazine complete (whole bound in scarlet morocco, at about a guinea per volume), and a small book, as small as an Elzevir, on the chimneypiece, by the side of a cigar-case. That small book had cost Frank more than all the rest put together; it was his Own Book, his book *par excellence;* book made up by himself—his BETTING-BOOK!

On a centre table were deposited Frank's well-brushed hat—a satin-wood box, containing kid gloves, of various delicate tints, from primrose to lilac—a tray full of cards and three-cornered notes—an opera-glass, and an ivory subscription-ticket to his opera stall.

In one corner was an ingenious receptacle for canes, sticks, and whips—I should not like, in these bad times, to have paid the bill for them; and mounting guard by that receptacle, stood a pair of boots as bright as Baron Levy's—" the force of brightness could no further go." Frank was in his dressing-gown—very good taste—quite Oriental—guaranteed to be true

India cashmere, and charged as such. Nothing could be more neat, though perfectly simple, than the appurtenances of his breakfast-table;—silver teapot, ewer and basin—all fitting into his dressing box—(for the which may Storr and Mortimer be now praised, and some day paid!) Frank looked very handsome—rather tired, and exceedingly bored. He had been trying to read the *Morning Post*, but the effort had proved too much for him.

Poor dear Frank Hazeldean!—true type of many a poor dear fellow who has long since gone to the dogs. And if, in this road to ruin, there had been the least thing to do the traveller any credit by the way! One feels a respect for the ruin of a man like Audley Egerton. He is ruined *en roi!* From the wrecks of his fortune he can look down and see stately monuments built from the stones of that dismantled edifice. In every institution which attests the humanity of England was a record of the princely bounty of the public man. In those objects of party, for which the proverbial sinews of war are necessary—in those rewards for service, which private liberality can confer—the hand of Egerton had been opened as with the heart of a king. Many a rising member of Parliament, in those days when talent was brought forward through the aid of wealth and rank, owed his career to the seat which Audley Egerton's large subscription had secured to him; many an obscure supporter in letters and the press looked back to the day when he had been freed from the jail by the gratitude of the patron. The city he represented was embellished at his cost; through the shire that held his mortgaged lands, which he had rarely ever visited, his gold had flowed as a Pactolus; all that could animate its public spirit, or increase its civilisation, claimed kindred with his munificence, and never had a claim disallowed. Even in his grand, careless household, with its large retinue and superb hospitality, there was something worthy of a representative of that time-honoured portion of our true nobility—the untitled gentlemen of the land. The Great Commoner had, indeed, "something to show" for the money he had disdained and squandered. But for Frank Hazeldean's mode of getting rid of the dross, when gone, what would be left to tell the tale? Paltry prints in a bachelor's lodging; a collection of canes and cherry-sticks; half-a-dozen letters in ill-spelt French from a *figurante;* some long-legged horses, fit for nothing but to lose a race; that damnable Betting-Book; and—*sic transit gloria*—down sweeps some hawk of a Levy, on the wings of an I O U, and not a feather is left of the pigeon!

Yet Frank Hazeldean has stuff in him—a good heart, and strict honour. Fool though he seem, there is sound sterling sense in some odd corner of his brains, if one could but get at it. All he wants to save him from perdition is, to do what he has never yet done—viz. pause and think. But, to be sure, that same operation of thinking is not so easy for folks unaccustomed to it, as people who think—think!

"I can't bear this," said Frank, suddenly, and springing to his feet. "This woman, I cannot get her out of my head. I ought to go down to the governor's; but then if he gets into a passion, and refuses his consent, where am I? And he will, too, I fear. I wish I could make out what Randal advises. He seems to recommend that I should marry Beatrice at once, and trust to my mother's influence to make all right afterwards. But when I ask, '*Is* that your advice?' he backs out of it. Well, I suppose he is right there. I can understand that he is unwilling, good fellow, to recommend anything that my father would disapprove. But still——"

Here Frank stopped in his soliloquy, and did make his first desperate effort to—think!

Now, O dear reader, I assume, of course, that thou art one of the class to which thought is familiar; and, perhaps, thou hast smiled in disdain or incredulity at that remark on the difficulty of thinking which preceded Frank Hazeldean's discourse to himself. But art thou quite sure that when thou hast tried to *think* thou hast always succeeded? Hast thou not often been duped by that pale visionary simulacrum of thought which goes by the name of *reverie?* Honest old Montaigne confessed that he did not understand that process of sitting down to think, on which some folks express themselves so glibly. He could not think unless he had a pen in his hand, and a sheet of paper before him; and so, by a manual operation, seized and connected the links of ratiocination. Very often has it happened to myself, when I have said to Thought peremptorily, "Bestir thyself—a serious matter is before thee—ponder it well—think of it," that that same Thought has behaved in the most refractory, rebellious manner conceivable—and instead of concentrating its rays into a single stream of light, has broken into all the desultory tints of the rainbow, colouring senseless clouds, and running off into the seventh heaven—so that after sitting a good hour by the clock, with brows as knit as if I was intent on squaring the circle, I have suddenly discovered that I might as well have gone comfortably to sleep—I have been doing nothing but dream—and the most nonsensical dreams! So when Frank Hazeldean, as he stopped at that meditative "But still"—and leaning his arm on the chimney-piece, and resting his face on his hand, felt himself at the grave crisis of life, and fancied he was going "to think on it," there only rose before him a succession of shadowy pictures: Randal Leslie, with an unsatisfactory countenance, from which he could extract nothing; —the Squire, looking as black as thunder in his study at Hazeldean;—his mother trying to plead for him, and getting herself properly scolded for her pains;—and then off went that Will-o'-the-wisp which pretended to call itself Thought, and began playing round the pale charming face of Beatrice di Negra in the drawing-room at Curzon Street, and repeating, with small elfin voice, Randal Leslie's assurance of the preceding day, "As to her affection for you, Frank, there is no doubt of *that;* she only begins to think you are trifling with her." And then there was a rapturous vision of a young gentleman on his knee, and the fair pale face bathed in blushes, and a clergyman standing by the altar, and a carriage-and-four with white favours at the church-door; and of a honeymoon, which would have astonished as to honey all the bees of Hymettus. And in the midst of these phantasmagoria, which composed what Frank fondly styled "making up his mind," there came a single man's elegant rat-tat-tat at the street-door.

"One never *has* a moment for *thinking*," cried Frank, and he called out to his valet, "Not at home."

But it was too late. Lord Spendquick was in the hall, and presently within the room. How d'ye do's were exchanged and hands shaken.

Lord Spendquick.—"I have a note for you, Hazeldean."

Frank (lazily).—"From whom?"

Lord Spendquick.—"Levy. Just come from him—never saw him in such a fidget. He was going into the city—I suppose to see X.Y. Dashed off this note for you—and would have sent it by a servant, but I said I would bring it."

Frank (looking fearfully at the note).—"I hope he does not want his money yet. *Private and confidential*—that looks bad."

Spendquick.—"Devilish bad indeed."

Frank opens the note and reads, half aloud, "Dear Hazeldean."

Spendquick (interrupting).—"Good sign! He always

'Spendquicks' me when he lends me money; and 'tis 'My dear Lord' when he wants it back. Capital sign!"

Frank reads on, but to himself, and with a changing countenance—

"DEAR HAZELDEAN,—I am very sorry to tell you that, in consequence of the sudden failure of a house at Paris with which I had large dealings, I am pressed, on a sudden, for all the ready money I can get. I don't want to inconvenience you; but do try and see if you can take up those bills of yours which I hold, and which, as you know, have been due some little time. I had hit on a way of arranging your affairs; but when I hinted at it, you seemed to dislike the idea; and Leslie has since told me that you have strong objections to giving any security on your prospective property. So no more of that, my dear fellow. I am called out in haste to try what I can do for a very charming client of mine, who is in great pecuniary distress, though she has for her brother a foreign Count, as rich as a Crœsus. There is an execution in her house. I am going down to the tradesman who put it in, but have no hope of softening him; and I fear there will be others before the day is out. Another reason for wanting money, if you can help me, *mon cher!*—An execution in the house of one of the most brilliant women in London—an execution in Curzon

Street, May Fair! It will be all over the town, if I can't stop it.—Yours in haste,

"LEVY.

"*P. S.* — Don't let what I have said vex you too much. I should not trouble you if Spendquick and Borrowell would pay me something. Perhaps you can get them to do so."

Struck by Frank's silence and paleness, Lord Spendquick here, in the kindest way possible, laid his hand on the young Guardsman's shoulder, and looked over the note with that freedom which gentlemen in difficulties take with each other's private and confidential correspondence. His eye fell on the postscript. "Oh, damn it," cried Spendquick, "but that's too bad—employing you to get me to pay him! Such horrid treachery. Make yourself easy, my dear Frank; I could never suspect you of anything so unhandsome. I could as soon suspect myself of—paying him——"

"Curzon Street! Count!" muttered Frank, as if waking from a dream. "It must be so." To thrust on his boots—change his dressing-robe for a frock-coat—snatch at his hat, gloves, and cane—break from Spendquick—descend the stairs—a flight at a leap—gain the street—throw himself into a cabriolet; all this was done before his astounded visitor could even recover breath enough to ask "What's the matter?"

Left thus alone, Lord Spendquick shook his head—shook it twice, as if fully to convince himself that there was nothing in it; and then rearranging his hat before the looking-glass, and drawing on his gloves deliberately, he walked down stairs, and strolled into White's, but with a bewildered and absent air. Standing at the celebrated bow-window, for some moments in musing silence, Lord Spendquick at last thus addressed an exceedingly cynical, sceptical, old *roué*—

"Pray do you think there is any truth in the stories about people in former times selling themselves to the devil?"

"Ugh," answered the *roué*, much too wise ever to be surprised. "Have you any personal interest in the question?"

"I!—no; but a friend of mine has just received a letter from Levy, and he flew out of the room in the most ex-tra-or-di-na-ry manner—just as people did in those days when their time was up! And Levy, you know, is——"

"Not quite as great a fool as the other dark gentleman to whom you would compare him: for Levy never made such bad bargains for himself. Time up! No doubt it is. I should not like to be in your friend's shoes."

"Shoes!" said Spendquick, with a sort of shudder; "you never saw a neater fellow, nor one, to do him justice, who takes more time in dressing than he does in general. And talking of shoes—he rushed out with the right boot on the left foot, and the left boot on the right. Very mysterious!" And a third time Lord Spendquick shook his head—and a third time that head seemed to him wondrous empty.

CHAPTER XXV.

But Frank had arrived in Curzon Street—leapt from the cabriolet—knocked at the door, which was opened by a strange-looking man in a buff waistcoat and corduroy smalls. Frank gave a glance at this personage—pushed him aside — and rushed upstairs. He burst into the drawing-room — no Beatrice was there. A thin elderly man, with a manuscript book in his hand, appeared engaged in examining the furniture and making an inventory, with the aid of Madame di Negra's upper servant. The thin man stared at Frank, and touched the hat which was on his head. The servant, who was a foreigner, approached Frank, and said, in broken English, that his lady did not receive—that she was unwell, and kept her room. Frank thrust a sovereign into the servant's hand, and begged him to tell Madame di Negra that Mr Hazeldean entreated the honour of an interview. As soon as the servant vanished on this errand, Frank seized the thin man by the arm—"What is this?—an execution?"

"Yes, sir."

"For what sum."

"Fifteen hundred and forty-seven pounds. We are the first in possession."

"There are others, then?"

"Or else, sir, we should never have taken this step. Most painful to our feelings, sir; but these foreigners are here to-day, and gone to-morrow. And——"

The servant re-entered. "Madame di Negra would see Mr Hazeldean. Would he walk upstairs?" Frank hastened to obey this summons.

Madame di Negra was in a small room which was fitted up as a boudoir. Her eyes showed the traces of recent tears, but her face was composed, and even rigid, in its haughty, though mournful expression. Frank, however, did not pause to notice her countenance—to hear her dignified salutation. All his timidity was gone. He saw but the woman whom he loved, in distress and humiliation. As the door closed on him he flung himself at her feet. He caught at her hand—the skirt of her robe.

"Oh! Madame di Negra!—Beatrice!" he exclaimed, tears in his eyes, and his voice half-broken by generous emotion; "forgive me—forgive me: don't see in me a mere acquaintance. By accident I learned, or, rather, guessed—this—this strange insult to which you are so unworthily exposed. I am here. Think of me—but as a friend—the truest friend. Oh! Beatrice,"—and he bent his head over the hand he held—"I never dared say so before—it seems presuming to say it now—but I cannot help it. I love you, I love you with my whole heart and soul;—to serve you—if only but to serve you!—I ask nothing else." And a sob went from his warm, young, foolish heart.

The Italian was deeply moved. Nor was her nature that of the mere sordid adventuress. So much love, and so much confidence! She was not prepared to betray the one, and entrap the other.

"Rise—rise," she said, softly; "I thank you gratefully. But do not suppose that I——"

"Hush—hush!—you must not refuse me. Hush! don't let your pride speak."

"No—it is not my pride. You exaggerate what is occurring here. You forget that I have a brother. I have sent for him. He is the only one I can apply to. Ah! that is his knock! But I shall never, never forget that I have found one generous, noble heart in this hollow world."

Frank would have replied, but he heard the Count's voice on the stairs, and had only time to rise and withdraw to the window, trying hard to repress his agitation and compose his countenance. Count di Peschiera entered—entered as a very personation of the beauty and magnificence of careless, luxurious, pampered, egotistical wealth. His surtout, trimmed with the costliest sables, flung back from his splendid chest. Amidst the folds of the glossy satin that enveloped his throat, gleamed a torquoise, of such value as a jeweller might have kept for fifty years before he could find a customer rich and frivolous enough to buy it. The very head of his cane was a masterpiece of art; and the man himself, so elegant despite his strength, and so fresh despite his years!—It is astonishing how well men wear when they think of no one but themselves!

"Pr-rr!" said the Count, not observing Frank behind the draperies of the window! "Pr-rr——. It seems to me that you must have passed a very unpleasant quarter of an hour. And now—*Dieu me damne—quoi faire!*"

Beatrice pointed to the window, and felt as if she could have sunk into the earth for shame. But as the Count spoke in French, and Frank did not very readily comprehend that language, the words escaped him; though his ear was shocked by a certain satirical levity of tone.

Frank came forward. The Count held out his hand, and, with a rapid change of voice and manner, said, "One whom my sister admits at such a moment must be a friend to me."

"Mr Hazeldean," said Beatrice, with meaning, "would indeed have nobly pressed on me the offer of an aid which I need no more, since you, my brother, are here."

"Certainly," said the Count, with his superb air of *grand seigneur;* "I will go down and clear your house of this impertinent *canaille.* But I thought your affairs were with Baron Levy. He should be here."

"I expect him every moment. Adieu! Mr Hazeldean." Beatrice extended her hand to her young lover with a frankness which was not without a certain pathetic and cordial dignity. Restrained from further words by the Count's presence, Frank bowed over the fair hand in silence, and retired. He was on the stairs when he was joined by Peschiera.

"Mr Hazeldean," said the latter, in a low tone, "will you come into the drawing-room?"

Frank obeyed. The man employed in his examination of the furniture was still at his task: but at a short whisper from the Count he withdrew.

"My dear sir," said Peschiera, "I am so unacquainted with your English laws, and your mode of settling embarrassments of this degrading nature, and you have evidently shown so kind a sympathy in my sister's distress, that I venture to ask you to stay here, and aid me in consulting with Baron Levy."

Frank was just expressing his unfeigned pleasure to be of the slightest use, when Levy's knock resounded at the street-door, and in another moment the Baron entered.

"Ouf!" said Levy, wiping his brows, and sinking into a chair as if he had been engaged in toils the most exhausting—"Ouf! this is a very sad business—very; and nothing, my dear Count, nothing but ready money can save us here."

"You know my affairs, Levy," replied Peschiera, mournfully shaking his head, "and that though in a few months, or it may be weeks, I could discharge with ease my sister's debts, whatever their amount, yet at this moment, and in a strange land, I have not the power to do so. The money I brought with me is nearly exhausted. Can you not advance the requisite sum?"

"Impossible!—Mr Hazeldean is aware of the distress under which I labour myself."

"In that case," said the Count, "all we can do to-day is to remove my sister, and let the execution proceed. Meanwhile, I will go among my friends, and see what I can borrow from them."

"Alas!" said Levy, rising and looking out of the window—"alas! we cannot remove the Marchesa—the worst is to come. Look!—you see those three men; they have a writ against her person: the moment she sets her foot out of these doors she will be arrested."*

"Arrested!" exclaimed Peschiera and Frank in a breath.

"I have done my best to prevent this disgrace, but in vain," said the Baron, looking very wretched. "You see these English tradespeople fancy they have no hold upon foreigners. But we can get bail; she must not go to prison——"

"Prison!" echoed Frank. He hastened to Levy and drew him aside. The Count seemed paralysed by shame and grief. Throwing himself back on the sofa, he covered his face with his hands.

"My sister!" groaned the Count—"daughter to a Peschiera, widow to a di Negra!" There was something affecting in the proud woe of this grand patrician.

"What is the sum?" whispered Frank, anxious that the poor Count should not overhear him; and indeed the Count seemed too stunned and overwhelmed to hear anything less loud than a clap of thunder!

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* At that date the law of *mesne process* existed still.

"We may settle all liabilities for £5000. Nothing to Peschiera, who is enormously rich. *Entre nous*, I doubt his assurance that he is without ready money. It may be so, but——"

"Five thousand pounds! How can I raise such a sum?"

"You, my dear Hazeldean? What are you talking about? To be sure you could raise twice as much with a stroke of your pen, and throw your own debts into the bargain. But—to be so generous to an acquaintance!"

"Acquaintance!—Madame di Negra! the height of my ambition is to claim her as my wife!"

"And these debts don't startle you?"

"If a man loves," answered Frank, simply, "he feels it most when the woman he loves is in affliction. And," he added, after a pause, "though these debts are faults, kindness at this moment may give me the power to cure for ever both her faults and my own. I can raise this money by a stroke of the pen! How?"

"On the Casino property."

Frank drew back.

"No other way?"

"Of course not. But I know your scruples; let us see if they can be conciliated. You would marry Madame di Negra; she will have £20,000 on her wedding-day. Why not arrange that, out of this sum, your anticipative charge on the Casino property be paid at once? Thus, in truth, it will be but for a few weeks that the charge will exist. The bond will remain locked in my desk—it can never come to your father's knowledge, nor wound his feelings. "And when you marry (if you will but be prudent in the meanwhile), you will not owe a debt in the world."

Here the Count suddenly started up.

"Mr Hazeldean, I asked you to stay and aid us by your counsel: I see now that counsel is unavailing. This blow on our house must fall! I thank you, sir—I thank you. Farewell. Levy, come with me to my poor sister, and prepare her for the worst."

"Count," said Frank, "hear me. My acquaintance with you is but slight, but I have long known and—and esteemed your sister. Baron Levy has suggested a mode in which I can have the honour and the happiness of removing this temporary but painful embarrassment. I can advance the money."

"No—no!" exclaimed Peschiera. "How can you suppose that I will hear of such a proposition! Your youth and benevolence mislead and blind you. Impossible, sir—impossible! Why, even if I had no pride, no delicacy of my own, my sister's fair fame——"

"Would suffer indeed," interrupted Levy, "if she were under such obligation to any one but her affianced husband. Nor, whatever my regard for you, Count, could I suffer my client, Mr Hazeldean, to make this advance upon any less valid security than that of the fortune to which Madame di Negra is entitled."

"Ha!—is this indeed so? You are a suitor for my sister's hand, Mr Hazeldean?"

"But not at this moment—not to owe her hand to the compulsion of gratitude," answered gentleman Frank.

"Gratitude! And you do not know her heart, then? Do not know—" the Count interrupted himself, and went on after a pause. "Mr Hazeldean, I need not say, that we rank among the first houses in Europe. My pride led me formerly into the error of disposing of my sister's hand to one whom she did not love—merely because in rank he was her equal. I will not again commit such an error, nor would Beatrice again obey me if I sought to constrain her. Where she marries, there she will love. If, indeed, she accepts you, as I believe she will, it will be from affection solely. If she does, I cannot scruple to accept this loan—a loan from a brother-in-law—loan to me, and not charged against her fortune! *That*, sir," turning to Levy, with his grand air, "you will take care to arrange. If she do not accept you, Mr Hazeldean, the loan, I repeat, is not to be thought of. Pardon me, if I leave you. This, one way or other, must be decided at once." The Count inclined his head with much stateliness, and then quitted the room. His step was heard ascending the stairs.

"If," said Levy, in the tone of a mere man of business—"if the Count pay the debts, and the lady's fortune be only charged with your own—after all it will not be a bad marriage in the world's eye, nor ought it to be in a father's. Trust me, we shall get Mr Hazeldean's consent, and cheerfully too."

Frank did not listen; he could only listen to his love, to his heart beating loud with hope and with fear.

Levy sate down before the table, and drew up a long list of figures in a very neat hand—a list of figures on *two* accounts, which the post-obit on the Casino was destined to efface.

After a lapse of time, which to Frank seemed interminable, the Count reappeared. He took Frank aside, with a gesture to Levy, who rose, and retired into the drawing-room.

"My dear young friend," said Peschiera, "as I suspected, my sister's heart is wholly yours. Stop; hear me out. But, unluckily I informed her of your generous proposal; it was most unguarded, most ill-judged in me, and that has well-nigh spoiled all; she has so much pride and spirit; so great a fear that you may think yourself betrayed into an imprudence which you may hereafter regret, that I am sure she will tell you that she does not love you, she cannot accept you, and so forth. Lovers like you are not easily deceived. Don't go by her words; but you shall see her yourself and judge. Come."

Followed mechanically by Frank, the Count ascended the stairs and threw open the door of Beatrice's room. The Marchesa's back was turned; but Frank could see that she was weeping.

"I have brought my friend to plead for himself," said the Count, in French; "and take my advice, sister, and do not throw away all prospect of real and solid happiness for a vain scruple. *Heed me!*" He retired and left Frank alone with Beatrice.

Then the Marchesa, as if by a violent effort, so sudden was her movement, and so wild her look, turned her face to her wooer, and came up to him where he stood.

"Oh!" she said, clasping her hands, "is this true? You would save me from disgrace, from a prison—and what can I give you in return? My love! No, no: I will not deceive you. Young, fair, noble, as you are, I do not love you as you should be loved. Go; leave this house; you do not know my brother. Go, go—while I have still strength, still virtue enough to reject whatever may protect me from him! whatever—may—Oh—-go, go."

"You do not love me?" said Frank. "Well, I don't wonder at it; you are so brilliant, so superior to me. I will abandon hope—I will leave you as you command me. But at least I will not part with my privilege to serve you. As for the rest—shame on me if I could be mean enough to boast of love, and enforce a suit, at such a moment."

Frank turned his face and stole away softly. He did not arrest his steps at the drawing-room; he went into the parlour, wrote a brief line to Levy charging him quietly to dismiss the execution, and to come to Frank's rooms with the necessary deeds; and, above all, to say nothing to the Count. Then he went out of the house and walked back to his lodgings.

That evening Levy came to him, and accounts were gone into, and papers signed; and the next morning Madame di Negra was free from debt; and there was a great claim on the reversion of the Casino estates; and at the noon of that next day Randal was closeted with Beatrice; and before the night, came a note from Madame di Negra, hurried, blurred with tears, summoning Frank to Curzon Street. And when he entered the Marchesa's drawing-room, Peschiera was seated beside his sister; and rising at Frank's entrance, said, "My dear brother-in-law!" and placed Frank's hand in Beatrice's.

"You accept—you accept me—and of your own free will and choice?"

And Beatrice answered, "Bear with me a little, and I will try to repay you with all my—all my—" She stopped short, and sobbed aloud.

"I never thought her capable of such acute feelings, such strong attachment," whispered the Count.

Frank heard, and his face was radiant. By degrees Madame di Negra recovered composure, and she listened with what her young lover deemed a tender interest, but what, in fact, was mournful and humbled resignation, to his joyous talk of the future. To him the hours passed by, brief and bright, like a flash of sunlight. And his dreams, when he retired to rest, were so golden! But, when he awoke the next morning, he said to himself, "What—what will they say at the Hall?"

At that same hour Beatrice, burying her face on her pillow, turned from the loathsome day, and could have prayed for death. At that same hour, Giulio Franzini, Count di Peschiera, dismissing some gaunt haggard Italians, with whom he had been in close conference, sallied forth to reconnoitre the house that contained Violante. At that same hour, Baron Levy was seated before his desk casting up a deadly array of figures, headed, "Account with the Right Hon. Audley Egerton, M.P., *Dr.* and *Cr.*"—title-deeds strewed around him, and Frank Hazeldean's post-obit peeping out fresh from the elder parchments. At that same hour, Audley Egerton had just concluded a letter from the chairman of his committee in the city he represented, which letter informed him that he had not a chance of being re-elected. And the lines of his face were as composed as usual, and his foot rested as firm on the grim iron box; but his hand was pressed to his heart, and his eye was on the clock; and his voice muttered—"Dr F—— should be here!" And at that hour, Harley L'Estrange, who the previous night had charmed courtly crowds with his gay humour, was pacing to and fro the room in his hotel with restless strides and many a heavy sigh;—and Leonard was standing by the fountain in his garden, and watching the wintry sunbeams that sparkled athwart the spray;—and Violante was leaning on Helen's shoulder, and trying archly, yet innocently, to lead Helen to talk of Leonard;—and Helen was gazing steadfastly on the floor, and answering but by monosyllables;—and Randal Leslie was walking down to his office for the last time, and reading, as he passed across the Green Park, a letter from *home*, from his sister; and then, suddenly crumpling the letter in his thin pale hand, he looked up, beheld in the distance the spires of the great national Abbey; and recalling the words of our hero Nelson, he muttered—"Victory *and* Westminster, but *not* the Abbey!" And Randal Leslie felt that, within the last few days, he had made a vast stride in his ambition;—his grasp on the old Leslie lands—Frank Hazeldean betrothed, and possibly disinherited; and Dick Avenel, in the background, opening against the hated Lansmere interest that same seat in Parliament which had first welcomed into public life Randal's ruined patron.

> "But some must laugh, and some must weep;
> Thus runs the world away!"

BOOK XI.

INITIAL CHAPTER.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF HATE AS AN AGENT IN CIVILISED LIFE.

It is not an uncommon crotchet amongst benevolent men to maintain that wickedness is necessarily a sort of insanity, and that nobody would make a violent start out of the straight path unless stung to such disorder by a bee in his bonnet. Certainly, when some very clever, well-educated person, like our friend Randal Leslie, acts upon the fallacious principle that "roguery is the best policy," it is curious to see how many points he has in common with the insane: what over-cunning—what irritable restlessness—what suspicious belief that the rest of the world are in a conspiracy against him, which it requires all his wit to baffle and turn to his own proper aggrandisement and profit. Perhaps some of my readers may have thought that I have represented Randal as unnaturally far-fetched in his schemes, too wire-drawn and subtle in his speculations; yet that is commonly the case with very refining intellects, when they choose to play the knave; it helps to disguise from themselves the ugliness of their ambition, just as a philosopher delights in the ingenuity of some metaphysical process, which ends in what plain men call "atheism," who would be infinitely shocked and offended if he were called an atheist.

Having premised thus much on behalf of the "Natural" in Randal Leslie's character, I must here fly off to say a word or two on the agency in human life exercised by a passion rarely seen without a mask in our debonnaire and civilised age—I mean Hate.

In the good old days of our forefathers, when plain speaking and hard blows were in fashion—when a man had his heart at the tip of his tongue, and four feet of sharp iron dangling at his side, Hate played an honest open part in the theatre of the world. In fact, when we read history, Hate seems to have "starred it" on the stage. But now, where is Hate?—who ever sees its face? Is it that smiling, good-tempered creature, that presses you by the hand so cordially? or that dignified figure of state that calls you its "Right Honourable friend?" Is it that bowing, grateful dependent?—is it that soft-eyed Amaryllis? Ask not, guess not: you will only know it to be Hate when the poison is in your cup, or the poniard in your breast. In the Gothic age, grim Humour painted "the Dance of Death;" in our polished century, some sardonic wit should give us "the Masquerade of Hate."

Certainly, the counter-passion betrays itself with ease to our gaze. Love is rarely a hypocrite. But Hate—how detect, and how guard against it? It lurks where you least suspect it; it is created by causes that you can the least foresee; and Civilisation multiplies its varieties, whilst it favours its disguise: for Civilisation increases the number of contending interests, and Refinement renders more susceptible to the least irritation the cuticle of Self-Love. But Hate comes covertly forth from some self-interest we have crossed, or some self-love we have wounded; and, dullards that we are, how seldom we are aware of our offence! You may be hated by a man you have never seen in your life: you may be hated as often by one you have loaded with benefits;—you may so walk as not to tread on a worm, but you must sit fast on your easy-chair till you are carried out to your bier, if you would be sure not to tread on some snake of a foe. But, then, what harm does the hate do us? Very often the harm is as unseen by the world as the hate is unrecognised by us. It may come on us unawares, in some solitary by-way of our life; strike us in our unsuspecting privacy; thwart us in some blessed hope we have never told to another; for the moment the world sees that it is Hate that strikes us, its worst power of mischief is gone.

We have a great many names for the same passion—Envy, Jealousy, Spite, Prejudice, Rivalry; but they are so many synonyms for the one old heathen demon. When the death-giving shaft of Apollo sent the plague to some unhappy Achæan, it did not much matter to the victim whether the god were called Helios or Smintheus.

No man you ever met in the world seemed more raised above the malice of Hate than Audley Egerton: even in the hot war of politics he had scarcely a personal foe; and in private life he kept himself so aloof and apart from others that he was little known, save by the benefits the waste of his wealth conferred. That the hate of any one could reach the austere statesman on his high pinnacle of esteem,—you would have smiled at the idea. But Hate is now, as it ever has been, an actual Power amidst "the Varieties of life;" and, in spite of bars to the door, and policeman in the street, no one can be said to sleep in safety while there wakes the eye of a single foe.

CHAPTER II.

The glory of Bond Street is no more: the title of Bond Street Lounger has faded from our lips. In vain the crowd of equipages and the blaze of shops: the renown of Bond Street was in its pavement — its pedestrians. Art thou old enough, O reader! to remember the Bond Street Lounger and his incomparable generation? For my part, I can just recall the decline of the grand era. It was on its wane when, in the ambition of boyhood, I first began to muse upon high neckcloths and Wellington boots. But the ancient *habitués*—the *magni nominis umbræ* —contemporaries of Brummell in his zenith—boon companions of George IV. in his regency—still haunted the spot. From four to six in the hot month of June, they sauntered stately to and fro, looking somewhat mournful even then — foreboding the extinction of their race. The Bond Street Lounger was rarely seen alone: he was a social animal, and walked arm-in-arm with his fellow-man. He did not seem born for the cares of these ruder times; not made was he for an age in which Finsbury returns members to Parliament. He loved his small talk; and never since then has talk been so pleasingly small. Your true Bond Street Lounger had a very dissipated look. His youth had been spent with heroes who loved their bottle. He himself had perhaps supped with Sheridan. He was by nature a spendthrift : you saw it in the roll of his walk. Men who make money rarely saunter ; men who save money rarely swagger. But saunter and swagger both united to stamp PRODIGAL on the Bond Street Lounger. And so familiar as he was with his own set, and so amusingly supercilious with the vulgar residue of mortals whose faces were strange to Bond Street. But he is gone. The world, though sadder for his loss, still strives to do its best without him ; and our young men, nowadays, attend to model cottages, and incline to Tractarianism. Still the place, to an unreflecting eye, has its brilliancy and bustle. But it is a thoroughfare, not a lounge. And adown the thoroughfare, somewhat before the hour when the throng is thickest, passed two gentlemen of an appearance exceedingly out of keeping with the place. Yet both had the air of men pretending to aristocracy—an old-world air of respectability and stake in the country, and Church-and-Stateism. The burlier of the two was even rather a beau in his way. He had first learned to dress, indeed, when Bond Street was at its acmé, and Brummell in his pride. He still retained in his garb the fashion of his youth ; only what then had spoken of the town, now betrayed the life of the country. His neckcloth ample and high, and of snowy whiteness, set off to comely advantage a face smooth-shaven, and of clear florid hues; his coat of royal blue, with buttons in which you might have seen yourself *veluti in speculum*, was, rather jauntily, buttoned across a waist that spoke of lusty middle age, free from the ambition, the avarice, and the anxieties that fret Londoners into threadpapers: his small-clothes, of greyish drab, loose at the thigh and tight at the knee, were made by Brummell's own breeches-maker, and the gaiters to match (thrust half-way down the calf), had a manly dandyism that would have done honour to the beau-ideal of a county member. The profession of this gentleman's companion was unmistakable—the shovel-hat, the clerical cut of the coat, the neckcloth without collar, that seemed made for its accessory—the band, and something very decorous, yet very mild, in the whole mien of this personage, all spoke of one who was every inch the gentleman and the parson.

"No," said the portlier of these two persons—"no, I can't say I like Frank's looks at all. There's certainly something on his mind. However, I suppose it will be all out this evening."

"He dines with you at your hotel, Squire? Well, you must be kind to him. We can't put old heads upon young shoulders."

"I don't object to his head being young," returned the Squire; "but I wish he had a little of Randal Leslie's good sense in it. I see how it will end; I must take him back to the country; and if he wants occupation, why he shall keep the hounds, and I'll put him into Brooksby Farm."

"As for the hounds," replied the Parson, "hounds necessitate horses; and I think more mischief comes to a young man of spirit, from the stables, than from any other place in the world. They ought to be exposed from the pulpit, those stables!" added Mr Dale, thoughtfully; "see what they entailed upon Nimrod! But Agriculture is a healthful and noble pursuit, honoured by sacred nations, and cherished by the greatest men in classical times. For instance, the Athenians were——"

"Bother the Athenians," cried the Squire, irreverently; "you need not go so far back for an example. It is enough for a Hazeldean that his father, and his grandfather, and his great grandfather, all farmed before him; and a devilish deal better, I take it, than any of those musty old Athenians—no offence to them. But I'll tell you one thing, Parson—a man, to farm well, and live in the country, should have a wife; it is half the battle."

"As to a battle, a man who is married is pretty sure of half, though not always the better half, of it," answered the Parson, who seemed peculiarly facetious that day. "Ah, Squire, I wish I could think Mrs Hazeldean right in her conjecture!—you would have the prettiest daughter-in-law in the three kingdoms. And I do believe that, if I could have a good talk with the young lady apart from her father, we could remove the only objection I know to the marriage. Those Popish errors——"

"Ah, very true!" cried the Squire; "that Pope sticks hard in my gizzard. I could excuse her being a foreigner, and not having, I suppose, a shilling in her pocket—bless her handsome face!—but to be worshipping images in her room instead of going to the parish church, that will never do. But you think you could talk her out of the Pope, and into the family pew?"

"Why, I could have talked her father out of the Pope, only, when he had not a word to say for himself, he bolted out of the window. Youth is more ingenuous in confessing its errors."

"I own," said the Squire, "that both Harry and I had a favourite notion of ours till this Italian girl got into our heads. Do you know we both took a great fancy to Randal's little sister—pretty, blushing, English-faced girl as ever you saw. And it went to Harry's good heart to see her so neglected by that silly fidgety mother of hers, her hair hanging about her ears; and I thought it would be a fine way to bring Randal and Frank more together, and enable me to do something for Randal himself—a good boy with Hazeldean blood in his veins. But Violante is so handsome, that I don't wonder at the boy's choice; and then it is our fault—we let them see so much of each other as children. However, I should be very angry if Rickeybockey had been playing sly, and running away from the Casino in order to give Frank an opportunity to carry on a clandestine intercourse with his daughter."

"I don't think that would be like Riccabocca; more like him to run away in order to deprive Frank of the best of all occasions to court Violante, if he so desired; for where could he see more of her than at the Casino?"

Squire.—"That's well put. Considering he was only a foreign doctor, and, for aught we know, once went about in a caravan, he is a gentleman-like fellow, that Rickeybockey. I speak of people as I find them. But what is your notion about Frank? I see you don't think he is in love with Violante, after all. Out with it, man; speak plain."

Parson.—"Since you so urge me, I own I do not think him in love with her; neither does my Carry, who is uncommonly shrewd in such matters."

Squire.—"Your Carry, indeed!—as if she were half as shrewd as my Harry. Carry—nonsense!"

Parson (reddening).—"I don't want to make invidious remarks; but, Mr Hazeldean, when you sneer at my Carry, I should not be a man if I did not say that——"

Squire (interrupting).—"She is a good little woman enough; but to compare her to my Harry!"

Parson.—"I don't compare her to your Harry; I don't compare her to any woman in England, sir. But you are losing your temper, Mr Hazeldean!"

Squire.—"I!"

Parson.—"And people are staring at you, Mr Hazeldean. For decency's sake, compose yourself, and change the subject. We are just at the Albany. I hope that we shall not find poor Captain Higginbotham as ill as he represents himself in his letter. Ah, is it possible? No, it cannot be. Look—look!"

Squire.—"Where—what—where? Don't pinch so hard. Bless me, do you see a ghost?"

Parson.—"There—the gentleman in black!"

Squire.—"Gentleman in black! What!—in broad daylight! Nonsense!"

Here the Parson made a spring forward, and, catching the arm of the person in question, who himself had stopped, and was gazing intently on the pair, exclaimed—

"Sir, pardon me; but is not your name Fairfield? Ah, it is Leonard—it is—my dear, dear boy! What joy! So altered, so improved, but still the same honest face. Squire, come here — your old friend Leonard Fairfield."

"And he wanted to persuade me," said the Squire, shaking Leonard heartily by the hand, "that you were the Gentleman in Black; but, indeed, he has been in strange humours and tantrums all the morning. Well, Master Lenny; why, you are grown quite a gentleman! The world thrives with you—eh! I suppose you are head-gardener to some grandee."

"Not that, sir," said Leonard, smiling. "But the world has thriven with me at last, though not without some rough usage at starting. Ah, Mr Dale, you can little guess how often I have thought of you and your discourse on Knowledge; and, what is more, how I have lived to feel the truth of your words, and to bless the lesson."

Parson (much touched and flattered).—"I expected nothing less from you, Leonard; you were always a lad of great sense and sound judgment. So you have thought of my little discourse on Knowledge, have you?"

SQUIRE.—"Hang knowledge! I have reason to hate the word. It burned down three ricks of mine—the finest ricks you ever set eyes on, Mr Fairfield."

PARSON.—"That was not knowledge, Squire; that was ignorance."

SQUIRE.—"Ignorance! The deuce it was. I'll just appeal to you, Mr Fairfield. We have been having sad riots in the shire, and the ringleader was just such another lad as you were!"

LEONARD.—"I am very much obliged to you, Mr Hazeldean. In what respect?"

SQUIRE.—"Why, he was a village genius, and always reading some cursed little tract or other; and got mighty discontented with King, Lords, and Commons, I suppose, and went about talking of the wrongs of the poor, and the crimes of the rich, till, by Jove, sir, the whole mob rose one day with pitchforks and sickles, and smash went Farmer Smart's thrashing-machines; and on the same night my ricks were on fire. We caught the rogues, and they were all tried; but the poor deluded labourers were let off with a short imprisonment. The village genius, thank Heaven, is sent packing to Botany Bay."

LEONARD.—"But, did his books teach him to burn ricks and smash machines?"

PARSON.—"No; he said quite the contrary, and declared that he had no hand in those misdoings."

SQUIRE.—"But he was proved to have excited, with his wild talk, the boobies who had! 'Gad, sir, there was a hypocritical Quaker once, who said to his enemy, 'I can't shed thy blood, friend, but I will hold thy head under water till thou art drowned.' And so there is a set of demagogical fellows, who keep calling out, 'Farmer This is an oppressor, and Squire That is a vampire! But no violence! Don't smash their machines, don't burn their ricks! Moral force, and a curse on all tyrants!' Well, and if poor Hodge thinks moral force is all my eye, and that the recommendation is to be read backwards, in the devil's way of reading the Lord's Prayer, I should like to know which of the two ought to go to Botany Bay—Hodge, who comes out like a man, if he thinks he is wronged, or t'other sneaking chap, who makes use of his knowledge to keep himself out of the scrape?"

PARSON.—"It may be very true; but when I saw that poor fellow at the bar, with his intelligent face, and heard his bold clear defence, and thought of all his hard struggles for knowledge, and how they had ended, because he forgot that knowledge is like fire, and must not be thrown amongst flax—why, I could have given my right hand to save him. And, oh, Squire, do you remember his poor mother's shriek of despair, when he was sentenced to transportation for life?—I hear it now! And what, Leonard—what do you think had misled him? At the bottom of all the mischief was a Tinker's bag. You cannot forget Sprott?"

LEONARD.—"Tinker's bag!—Sprott!"

Squire.—"That rascal, sir, was the hardest fellow to nab you could possibly conceive; as full of quips and quirks as an Old Bailey lawyer. But we managed to bring it home to him. Lord! his bag was choke-full of tracts against every man who had a good coat on his back; and as if that was not enough, cheek by jowl with the tracts were lucifers, contrived on a new principle, for teaching my ricks the theory of spontaneous combustion. The labourers bought the lucifers——"

Parson.—"And the poor village genius bought the tracts."

Squire.—"All headed with a motto—'To teach the working-classes that knowledge is power.' So that I was right in saying that knowledge had burnt my ricks: knowledge inflamed the village genius, the village genius inflamed fellows more ignorant than himself, and they inflamed my stackyard. However, lucifers, tracts, village genius, and Sprott, are all off to Botany Bay; and the shire has gone on much the better for it. So no more of your knowledge for me, begging your pardon, Mr Fairfield. Such uncommonly fine ricks as mine were, too! I declare, Parson, you are looking as if you felt pity for Sprott; and I saw you, indeed, whispering to him as he was taken out of court."

Parson (looking sheepish).—"Indeed, Squire, I was only asking him what had become of his donkey, an unoffending creature."

Squire.—"Unoffending! Upset me amidst a thistlebed in my own village green. I remember it. Well, what did he say *had* become of the donkey?"

PARSON.—"He said but one word; but that showed all the vindictiveness of his disposition. He said it with a horrid wink, that made my blood run cold. 'What's become of your poor donkey?' said I, and he answered——"

SQUIRE.—"Go on. He answered——"

PARSON.—"Sausages."

SQUIRE.—"Sausages! Like enough; and sold to the poor; and that's what the poor will come to if they listen to such revolutionising villains. Sausages! Donkey sausages!" (spitting)—"'Tis as bad as eating one another; perfect cannibalism."

Leonard, who had been thrown into grave thought by the history of Sprott and the village genius, now pressing the Parson's hand, asked permission to wait on him before Mr Dale quitted London; and was about to withdraw, when the Parson, gently detaining him, said—"No; don't leave me yet, Leonard—I have so much to ask you and to talk about. I shall be at leisure shortly. We are just now going to call on a relation of the Squire's, whom you must recollect, I am sure—Captain Higginbotham—Barnabas Higginbotham. He is very poorly."

"And I am sure he would take it kind in you to call, too," said the Squire, with great good nature.

LEONARD.—"Nay, sir, would not that be a great liberty?"

SQUIRE.—"Liberty! to ask a poor sick gentleman how he is? Nonsense. And I say, sir, perhaps as no doubt you have been living in town, and know more of new-fangled notions than I do—perhaps you can tell us whether or not it is all humbug, that new way of doctoring people."

LEONARD.—"What new way, sir? There are so many."

SQUIRE.—"Are there? Folks in London *do* look uncommonly sickly. But my poor cousin (he was never a Solomon) has got hold, he says, of a homey—homely—What's the word, Parson?"

PARSON.—"Homœopathist."

SQUIRE.—"That's it! You see the captain went to live with one Sharpe Currie, a relation who had a great deal of money, and very little liver;—made the one, and left much of the other in Ingee, you understand. The Captain had *expectations* of the money. Very natural, I dare say; but Lord, sir, what do you think has happened? Sharpe Currie has done him. Would not die, sir; got back his liver, and the Captain has lost his own. Strangest thing you ever heard. And then the ungrateful old Nabob has dismissed the Captain, saying, 'He can't bear to have invalids about him;' and is going to marry, and I have no doubt will have children by the dozen!"

PARSON.—"It was in Germany, at one of the Spas, that Mr Currie recovered; and as he had the selfish inhumanity to make the Captain go through a course of waters simultaneously with himself, it has so chanced that the same waters that cured Mr Currie's liver have destroyed Captain Higginbotham's. An English homœopathic physician, then staying at the Spa, has attended the Captain hither, and declares that he will restore him by infinitesimal doses of the same chemical properties that were found in the waters which diseased him. Can there be anything in such a theory ?"

LEONARD.—"I once knew a very able, though eccentric homœopathist, and I am inclined to believe there may be something in the system. My friend went to Germany; it may possibly be the same person who attends the Captain. May I ask his name ?"

SQUIRE.—"Cousin Barnabas does not mention it. You may ask it of himself, for here we are at his chambers. I say, Parson," whispering slily, "if a small dose of what hurt the Captain is to cure him, don't you think the proper thing would be — a legacy ? Ha ! ha !"

PARSON (trying not to laugh).—"Hush, Squire. Poor human nature ! We must be merciful to its infirmities. Come in, Leonard."

Leonard, interested in his doubt whether he might thus chance again upon Dr Morgan, obeyed the invitation, and with his two companions followed the woman who "did for the Captain and his rooms," across the small lobby into the presence of the sufferer.

CHAPTER III.

WHATEVER the disposition towards merriment at his cousin's expense entertained by the Squire, it vanished instantly at the sight of the Captain's doleful visage and emaciated figure.

"Very good in you to come to town to see me—very good in you, cousin; and in you too, Mr Dale. How very well you are both looking. I am a sad wreck. You might count every bone in my body."

"Hazeldean air and roast beef will soon set you up, my boy," said the Squire, kindly. "You were a great goose to leave them, and these comfortable rooms of yours in the Albany."

"They *are* comfortable, though not showy," said the Captain, with tears in his eyes. "I had done my best to make them so. New carpets—this very chair (morocco!),—that Japan cat (holds toast and muffins)—just when—just when," the tears here broke forth, and the Captain fairly whimpered—"just when that ungrateful, bad-hearted man wrote me word 'he was—was dying, and lone in the world;' and—and—to think what I've gone through for him;—and to treat me so. Cousin William, he has grown as hale as yourself, and—and——"

"Cheer up, cheer up!" cried the compassionate Squire. "It is a very hard case, I allow. But you see, as the old proverb says, ''tis ill waiting for a dead man's shoes;' and in future—I don't mean offence,—but I think, if you would calculate less on the livers of your relations, it would be all the better for your own. Excuse me."

"Cousin William," replied the poor Captain, "I am sure I never calculated; but still, if you had seen that deceitful man's good-for-nothing face—as yellow as a guinea,—and have gone through all I've gone through, you would have felt cut to the heart, as I do. I can't bear ingratitude; I never could. But let it pass. Will that gentleman take a chair?"

PARSON.—"Mr Fairfield has kindly called with us, because he knows something of this system of homœopathy which you have adopted, and may, perhaps, know the practitioner. What is the name of your doctor?"

CAPTAIN (looking at his watch).—"That reminds me" (swallowing a globule). "A great relief these little pills—after the physic I've taken to please that malignant man. He always tried his doctor's stuff upon me. But there's another world, and a juster."

With that pious conclusion, the Captain again began to weep.

"Touched," muttered the Squire, with his forefinger on his forehead. "You seem to have a good tidy sort of a nurse here, Cousin Barnabas. I hope she's pleasant, and lively, and don't let you take on so?"

"Hist!—don't talk of her. All mercenary; every bit of her fawning! Would you believe it?—I give her ten shillings a-week, besides all that goes down of my pats of butter and rolls; and I overheard the jade saying to the laundress that 'I could not last long,—and she'd—EXPECTATIONS!' Ah, Mr Dale, when one thinks of the sinfulness there is in this life! But I'll not think of it; no—I'll not. Let us change the subject. You were asking my doctor's name. It is——"

Here the woman with "expectations" threw open the door, and suddenly announced—"DR MORGAN."

CHAPTER IV.

The Parson started, and so did Leonard.

The Homœopathist did not at first notice either. With an unobservant bow to the visitors, he went straight to the patient, and asked, "How go the symptoms?"

Therewith the Captain commenced, in a tone of voice like a schoolboy reciting the catalogue of the ships in Homer. He had been evidently conning the symptoms, and learning them by heart. Nor was there a single nook or corner in his anatomical organisation, so far as the Captain was acquainted with that structure, but what some symptom or other was dragged therefrom, and exposed to day. The Squire listened with horror to the morbific inventory, muttering at each dread interval, "Bless me! Lord bless me! What, more still! Death would be a very happy release!" Meanwhile, the Doctor endured the recital with exemplary patience, noting down in the leaves of his pocket-book what appeared to him the salient points in this fortress of disease to which he had laid siege, and then, drawing forth a minute paper, said,—

"Capital—nothing can be better. This powder must be dissolved in eight table-spoonfuls of water; one spoonful every two hours."

"Table-spoonful?"

"Table-spoonful."

"'Nothing can be better,' did you say, sir?" repeated the Squire, who, in his astonishment at that assertion, applied to the Captain's description of his sufferings, had hitherto hung fire—"nothing can be better?"

"For the diagnosis, sir!" replied Dr Morgan.

"For the dogs' noses, very possibly," quoth the Squire; "but for the inside of Cousin Higginbotham, I should think nothing could be worse."

"You are mistaken, sir," replied Dr Morgan. "It is not the Captain who speaks here—it is his liver. Liver, sir, though a noble, is an imaginative organ, and indulges in the most extraordinary fictions. Seat of poetry, and love, and jealousy—the liver. Never believe what it says. You have no idea what a liar it is! But—ahem—ahem. Cott—I think I've seen you before, sir. Surely your name's Hazeldean?"

"William Hazeldean, at your service, Doctor. But where have you seen me?"

"On the hustings at Lansmere. You were speaking on behalf of your distinguished brother, Mr Egerton."

"Hang it!" cried the Squire; "I think it must have been my liver that spoke there! for I promised the electors that that half-brother of mine would stick by the land; and I never told a bigger lie in my life!"

Here the patient, reminded of his other visitors, and afraid he was going to be bored with the enumeration of the Squire's wrongs, and probably the whole history of his duel with Captain Dashmore, turned with a languid wave of his hand, and said, "Doctor, another friend of mine, the Rev. Mr Dale,—and a gentleman who is acquainted with homœopathy."

"Dale? What, more old friends!" cried the Doctor, rising; and the Parson came somewhat reluctantly from the window nook, to which he had retired. The Parson and the Homœopathist shook hands.

"We have met before on a very mournful occasion," said the Doctor, with feeling.

The Parson held his finger to his lips, and glanced towards Leonard. The Doctor stared at the lad, but he did not recognise in the person before him the gaunt, care-worn boy whom he had placed with Mr Prickett, until Leonard smiled and spoke. And the smile and the voice sufficed.

"Cott—and it *is* the poy!" cried Dr Morgan; and he actually caught hold of Leonard, and gave him an affectionate Welsh hug. Indeed, his agitation at these several surprises became so great that he stopped short, drew forth a globule—"*Aconite*—good against nervous shocks!" and swallowed it incontinently.

"Gad," said the Squire, rather astonished, "'tis the first doctor I ever saw swallow his own medicine! There must be something in it."

The Captain now, highly disgusted that so much attention was withdrawn from his own case, asked, in a querulous voice, "And as to diet? What shall I have for dinner?"

"A friend!" said the Doctor, wiping his eyes.

"Zounds!" cried the Squire, retreating, "do you mean to say, that the British laws (to be sure they are very much changed of late) allow you to diet your patients upon their fellow men? Why, Parson, this is worse than the donkey sausages."

"Sir," said Dr Morgan, gravely, "I mean to say, that it matters little what we eat, in comparison with care as to whom we eat with. It is better to exceed a little with a friend, than to observe the strictest regimen, and eat alone. Talk and laughter help the digestion, and are indispensable in affections of the liver. I have no doubt, sir, that it was my patient's agreeable society that tended to restore to health his dyspeptic relative Mr Sharpe Currie."

The Captain groaned aloud.

"And, therefore, if one of you gentlemen will stay and dine with Mr Higginbotham, it will greatly assist the effects of his medicine."

The Captain turned an imploring eye, first towards his cousin, then towards the Parson.

"I'm engaged to dine with my son—very sorry," said the Squire. "But Dale, here——"

"If he will be so kind," put in the Captain, "we might cheer the evening with a game at whist—double dummy."

Now, poor Mr Dale had set his heart on dining with an old college friend, and having no stupid, prosy double dummy, in which one cannot have the pleasure of scolding one's partner, but a regular orthodox rubber, with the pleasing prospect of scolding all the three other performers. But as his quiet life forbade him to be a hero in great things, the Parson had made up his mind to be a hero in small ones. Therefore, though with rather a rueful face, he accepted the Captain's invitation, and promised to return at six o'clock to dine. Meanwhile, he must hurry off to the other end of the town, and excuse himself from the pre-engagement he had already formed. He now gave his card, with the address of a quiet family hotel thereon, to Leonard, and not looking quite so charmed with Dr Morgan as he was before that unwelcome prescription, he took his leave. The Squire too, having to see a new churn, and execute various commissions for his Harry, went his way (not, however, till Dr Morgan had assured him that, in a few weeks, the Captain might safely remove to Hazeldean); and Leonard was about to follow, when Morgan hooked his arm in his old *protégé's*, and said, "But I must have some talk with you; and you have to tell me all about the little orphan girl."

Leonard could not resist the pleasure of talking about Helen; and he got into the carriage, which was waiting at the door for the Homœopathist.

"I am going into the country a few miles to see a patient," said the Doctor; "so we shall have time for undisturbed consultation. I have so often wondered what had become of you. Not hearing from Prickett, I wrote to him, and received from his heir an answer as dry as a bone. Poor fellow, I found that he had neglected his globules and quitted the globe. Alas, *pulvis et umbra sumus!* I could learn no tidings of you. Prickett's successor declared he knew nothing about you. I hoped the best; for I always fancied you were one who would fall on your legs—bilious nervous temperament; such are the men who succeed in their undertakings, especially if they take a spoonful of *chamomilla* whenever they are over-excited. So now for your history and the little girl's—pretty little thing—never saw a more susceptible constitution, nor one more suited to *pulsatilla*."

Leonard briefly related his own struggles and success, and informed the good Doctor how they had at last discovered the nobleman in whom poor Captain Digby had confided, and whose care of the orphan had justified the confidence.

Dr Morgan opened his eyes at hearing the name of Lord L'Estrange. "I remember him very well," said he, "when I practised murder as an allopathist at Lansmere. But to think that wild boy, so full of whim, and life, and spirit, should become staid enough for a guardian to that dear little child, with her timid eyes and *pulsatilla* sensibilities. Well, wonders never cease. And he has befriended you too, you say. Ah, he knew your family."

"So he says. Do you think, sir, that he ever knew—ever saw—my mother?"

"Eh! your mother?—Nora?" exclaimed the Doctor, quickly; and, as if struck by some sudden thought, his brows met, and he remained silent and musing a few moments; then, observing Leonard's eyes fixed on him earnestly, he replied to the question:—

"No doubt he saw her; she was brought up at Lady Lansmere's. Did he not tell you so?"

"No." A vague suspicion here darted through Leonard's mind, but as suddenly vanished. His father! Impossible. His father must have deliberately wronged the dead mother. And was Harley L'Estrange a man capable of such wrong? And had he been Harley's son, would not Harley have guessed it at once, and so guessing, have owned and claimed him? Besides, Lord L'Estrange looked so young;—old enough to be Leonard's father!—he could not entertain the idea. He roused himself and said, falteringly—

"You told me you did not know by what name I should call my father."

"And I told you the truth, to the best of my belief."

"By your honour, sir?"

"By my honour, I do not know it."

There was now a long silence. The carriage had long left London, and was on a high-road somewhat lonelier and more free from houses than most of those which form the entrances to the huge city. Leonard gazed wistfully from the window, and the objects that met his eyes gradually seemed to appeal to his memory. Yes! it was the road by which he had first approached the metropolis, hand in hand with Helen—and hope so busy at his poet's heart. He sighed deeply. He thought he would willingly have resigned all he had won—independence, fame, all — to feel again the clasp of that tender hand—again to be the sole protector of that gentle life.

The Doctor's voice broke on his reveric. "I am going to see a very interesting patient—coats to his stomach quite worn out, sir—man of great learning, with a very inflamed cerebellum. I can't do him much good, and he does me a great deal of harm."

"How harm?" asked Leonard, with an effort at some rejoinder.

"Hits me on the heart, and makes my eyes water; —very pathetic case—grand creature, who has thrown himself away. Found him given over by the allopathists, and in a high state of *delirium tremens*—restored him for a time—took a great liking to him—could not help it—swallowed a great many globules to harden myself against him — would not do — brought him over to England with the other patients, who all pay me well (except Captain Higginbotham). But this poor fellow pays me nothing—costs me a great deal in time and turnpikes, and board and lodging. Thank Heaven I'm a single man, and can afford it! My poy, I would let all the other patients go to the allopathists if I could but save this poor, big, penniless, princely fellow. But what can one do with a stomach that has not a rag of its coats left? Stop" (the Doctor pulled the check-string.) "This is the stile. I get out here and go across the fields."

That stile — those fields — with what distinctness Leonard remembered them. Ah, where was Helen? Could she ever, ever again be his child-angel?

"I will go with you, if you permit," said he to the good Doctor. "And while you pay your visit, I will saunter by a little brook that I think must run by your way."

"The Brent—you know that brook? Ah, you should hear my poor patient talk of it, and of the hours he has spent angling in it—you would not know whether to laugh or cry. The first day he was brought down to the place, he wanted to go out and try once more, he said, for his old deluding demon—a one-eyed perch."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Leonard, "are you speaking of John Burley?"

"To be sure, that is his name—John Burley."

"Oh, has it come to this? Cure him, save him, if it be in human power. For the last two years I have sought his trace everywhere, and in vain, the moment I had money of my own—a home of my own. Poor, erring, glorious Burley: take me to him. Did you say there was no hope?"

"I did not say that," replied the Doctor. "But art can only assist nature; and though nature is ever at work to repair the injuries we do to her, yet, when the coats of a stomach are all gone, she gets puzzled, and so do I. You must tell me another time how you came to know Burley; for here we are at the house, and I see him at the window looking out for me."

The Doctor opened the garden-gate of the quiet cottage to which poor Burley had fled from the pure presence of Leonard's child-angel. And with heavy step, and heavy heart, Leonard mournfully followed, to behold the wrecks of him whose wit had glorified orgy, and "set the table in a roar." Alas, poor Yorick !

CHAPTER V.

AUDLEY EGERTON stands on his hearth alone. During the short interval that has elapsed since we last saw him, events had occurred memorable in English history, wherewith we have nought to do in a narrative studiously avoiding all party politics, even when treating of politicians. The new Ministers had stated the general programme of their policy, and introduced one measure in especial that had lifted them at once to the dizzy height of popular power. But it became clear that this measure could not be carried without a fresh appeal to the people. A dissolution of Parliament, as Audley's sagacious experience had foreseen, was inevitable. And Audley Egerton had no chance of return for his own seat—for the great commercial city identified with his name. Oh sad, but not rare, instance of the mutabilities of that same popular favour now enjoyed by his successors! The great commoner, the weighty speaker, the expert man of business, the statesman who had seemed a type of the practical steady sense for which our middle class is renowned—he who, not three years since, might have had his honoured choice of the largest popular constituencies in the kingdom—he, Audley Egerton, knew not one single town (free from the influences of private property or interest) in which the obscurest candidate, who bawled out for the new liberal measure, would not have beaten him hollow—where one popular hustings, on which that grave sonorous voice that had stilled so often the roar of faction, would not be drowned amidst the hoots of the scornful mob!

True, what were called the close boroughs still existed—true, many a chief of his party would have been too proud of the honour of claiming Audley Egerton for his nominee. But the ex-minister's haughty soul shrunk from this contrast to his past position. And to fight against the popular measure as member of one of the seats most denounced by the people,—he felt it was a post in the grand army of parties below his dignity to occupy, and foreign to his peculiar mind, which required the sense of consequence and station. And if, in a few months, those seats were swept away—were annihilated from the rolls of Parliament—where was he? Moreover, Egerton, emancipated from the trammels that had bound his will while his party was in office, desired, in the turn of events, to be nominee of no man—desired to stand at least freely and singly on the ground of his own services, be guided by his own penetration; no law for action, but his strong sense and his stout English heart. Therefore he had declined all offers from those who could still bestow seats in Parliament. Seats that he could purchase with hard gold were yet open to him; and the £5000 he had borrowed from Levy were yet untouched.

To this lone public man, public life, as we have seen, was the all in all. But now more than ever it was vital to his very wants. Around him yawned ruin. He knew that it was in Levy's power at any moment to foreclose on his mortgaged lands—to pour in the bonds and the bills which lay within those rosewood receptacles that lined the fatal lair of the sleek usurer—to seize on the very house in which now moved all the pomp of a retinue that vied with the *valetaille* of dukes—to advertise for public auction, under execution, "the costly effects of the Right Hon. Audley Egerton." But consummate in his knowledge of the world, Egerton felt assured that Levy would not adopt these measures against him while he could still tower in the van of political war—while he could still see before him the full chance of restoration to power, perhaps to power still higher than before—perhaps to power the highest of all beneath the throne. That Levy, whose hate he divined, though he did not conjecture all its causes, had hitherto delayed even a visit, even a menace, seemed to him to show that Levy still thought him one "to be helped," or at least one too powerful to crush. To secure his position in Parliament unshackled, unfallen, if but for another year,—new combinations of party might arise, new reactions take place in public opinion! And, with his hand pressed to his heart, the stern firm man muttered—"If not, I ask but to die in my harness, and that men may not know that I am a pauper, until all that I need from my country is a grave."

Scarce had these words died upon his lips, ere two quick knocks in succession resounded at the street-door. In another moment Harley entered, and, at the same time, the servant in attendance approached Audley, and announced Baron Levy.

"Beg the Baron to wait, unless he would prefer to name his own hour to call again," answered Egerton, with the slightest possible change of colour. "You can say I am now with Lord L'Estrange."

"I had hoped you had done for ever with that deluder of youth," said Harley, as soon as the groom of the chambers had withdrawn. "I remember that you saw too much of him in the gay time, ere wild oats are sown; but now surely you can never need a loan; and if so, is not Harley L'Estrange by your side?"

EGERTON.—"My dear Harley!—doubtless he but comes to talk to me of some borough. He has much to do with those delicate negotiations."

HARLEY.—"And I have come on the same business. I claim the priority. I not only hear in the world, but I see by the papers, that Josiah Jenkins, Esq., known to fame as an orator who leaves out his h's, and young Lord Willoughby Whiggolin, who is just made a Lord of the Admiralty, because his health is too delicate for the army, are certain to come in for the city which you and your present colleague will as certainly vacate. That is true, is it not?"

Egerton.—"My old Committee now vote for Jenkins and Whiggolin. And I suppose there will not be even a contest. Go on."

"So my father and I are agreed that you must condescend, for the sake of old friendship, to be once more member for Lansmere!"

"Harley," exclaimed Egerton, changing countenance far more than he had done at the announcement of Levy's portentous visit—"Harley, No, no!"

"No! But why? Wherefore such emotion?" asked L'Estrange, in surprise.

Audley was silent.

Harley.—"I suggested the idea to two or three of the late Ministers; they all concur in advising you to accede. In the first place, if declining to stand for the place which tempted you from Lansmere, what more natural than that you should fall back on that earlier representation? In the second place, Lansmere is neither a rotten borough, to be bought, nor a close borough, under one man's nomination. It is a tolerably large constituency. My father, it is true, has considerable interest in it, but only what is called the legitimate influence of property. At all events, it is more secure than a contest for a larger town, more dignified than a seat for a smaller. Hesitating still? Even my mother entreats me to say how she desires you to renew that connection."

"Harley!" again exclaimed Egerton; and fixing upon his friend's earnest face, eyes which, when softened by emotion, were strangely beautiful in their expression—“Harley, if you could but read my heart at this moment, you would—you would——” His voice faltered, and he fairly bent his proud head upon Harley's shoulder; grasping the hand he had caught —nervously, clingingly—“O Harley, if I ever lose your love, your friendship,—nothing else is left to me in the world.”

“Audley, my dear, dear Audley, is it you who speak to me thus? You, my school friend, my life's confidant—you?”

“I am grown very weak and foolish,” said Egerton, trying to smile. “I do not know myself. I, too, whom you have so often called ‘Stoic,’ and likened to the Iron Man in the poem which you used to read by the river-side at Eton.”

“But even then, my Audley, I knew that a warm human heart (do what you would to keep it down) beat strong under the iron ribs. And I often marvel now, to think you have gone through life so free from the wilder passions. Happier so!”

Egerton, who had turned his face from his friend's gaze, remained silent for a few moments, and he then sought to divert the conversation, and roused himself to ask Harley how he had succeeded in his views upon Beatrice, and his watch on the Count.

“With regard to Peschiera,” answered Harley, “I think we must have overrated the danger we apprehended, and that his wagers were but an idle boast. He has remained quiet enough, and seems devoted to play. His sister has shut her doors both on myself and my young associate during the last few days. I almost fear that in spite of very sage warnings of mine, she must have turned his poet's head, and that either he has met with some scornful rebuff to incautious admiration, or that he himself has grown aware of peril, and declines to face it; for he is very much embarrassed when I speak to him respecting her. But if the Count is not formidable, why, his sister is not needed; and I hope yet to get justice for my Italian friend through the ordinary channels. I have secured an ally in a young Austrian prince, who is now in London, and who has promised to back, with all his influence, a memorial I shall transmit to Vienna. *Apropos*, my dear Audley, now that you have a little breathing-time, you must fix an hour for me to present to you my young poet, the son of *her* sister. At moments the expression of his face is so like hers."

"Ay, ay," answered Egerton, quickly. "I will see him as you wish, but later. I have not yet that breathing-time you speak of; but you say he has prospered; and, with your friendship, he is secure from fortune. I rejoice to think so."

"And your own *protégé*, this Randal Leslie, whom you forbid me to dislike—hard task!—what has he decided?"

"To adhere to my fate. Harley, if it please Heaven that I do not live to return to power, and provide adequately for that young man, do not forget that he clung to me in my fall."

"If he still cling to you faithfully, I will never forget it. I will forget only all that now makes me doubt him. But *you* talk of not living, Audley! Pooh!—your frame is that of a predestined octogenarian."

"Nay," answered Audley, "I was but uttering one of those vague generalities which are common upon all mortal lips. And now farewell—I must see this Baron."

"Not yet, until you have promised to consent to my proposal, and be once more member for Lansmere.—Tut! don't shake your head. I cannot be denied. I claim your promise in right of our friendship, and shall be seriously hurt if you even pause to reflect on it."

"Well, well, I know not how to refuse you, Harley; but you have not been to Lansmere yourself since—since that sad event. You must not revive the old wound—*you* must not go; and—and, I own it, Harley, the remembrance of it pains even me. I would rather not go to Lansmere."

"Ah, my friend, this is an excess of sympathy, and I cannot listen to it. I begin even to blame my own weakness, and to feel that we have no right to make ourselves the soft slaves of the past."

"You do appear to me of late to have changed," cried Egerton, suddenly, and with a brightening aspect. "Do tell me that you are happy in the contemplation of your new ties—that I shall live to see you once more restored to your former self."

"All I can answer, Audley," said L'Estrange, with a thoughtful brow, "is, that you are right in one thing—I am changed; and I am struggling to gain strength for duty and for honour. Adieu! I shall tell my father that you accede to our wishes."

CHAPTER VI.

When Harley was gone, Egerton sunk back on his chair, as if in extreme physical or mental exhaustion, all the lines of his countenance relaxed and jaded.

"To go back to that place—there—there—where—Courage, courage—what is another pang?"

He rose with an effort, and folding his arms tightly across his breast, paced slowly to and fro the large, mournful, solitary room. Gradually his countenance assumed its usual cold and austere composure—the secret eye, the guarded lip, the haughty collected front. The man of the world was himself once more.

"Now to gain time, and to baffle the usurer," murmured Egerton, with that low tone of easy scorn which bespoke consciousness of superior power and the familiar mastery over hostile natures. He rang the bell: the servant entered.

"Is Baron Levy still waiting?"

"Yes, sir."

"Admit him."

Levy entered.

"I beg your pardon, Levy," said the ex-minister, "for having so long detained you. I am now at your commands."

"My dear fellow," returned the Baron, "no apologies between friends so old as we are; and I fear that my business is not so agreeable as to make you impatient to discuss it."

Egerton (with perfect composure).—"I am to conclude, then, that you wish to bring our accounts to a close. Whenever you will, Levy."

The Baron (disconcerted and surprised).—"*Peste! mon cher*, you take things coolly. But if our accounts are closed, I fear you will have but little to live upon."

Egerton.—"I can continue to live on the salary of a Cabinet Minister."

Baron.—"Possibly; but you are no longer a Cabinet Minister."

Egerton.—"You have never found me deceived in a political prediction. Within twelve months (should life be spared to me) I shall be in office again. If the same to you, I would rather wait till then, formally and amicably to resign to you my lands and this house. If you grant that reprieve, our connection can thus close, without the *éclat* and noise, which may be invidious to you, as it would be disagreeable to me. But if that delay be inconvenient, I will appoint a lawyer to examine your accounts, and adjust my liabilities."

The Baron (soliloquising).—"I don't like this. A lawyer! That may be awkward.

Egerton (observing the Baron, with a curl on his lip).—"Well, Levy, how shall it be?"

The BARON.—"You know, my dear fellow, it is not my character to be hard on any one, least of all upon an old friend. And if you really think there is a chance of your return to office, which you apprehend that an *esclandre* as to your affairs at present might damage, why, let us see if we can conciliate matters. But, first, *mon cher*, in order to become a Minister, you must at least have a seat in Parliament: and, pardon me the question, how the deuce are you to find one?"

EGERTON.—"It is found."

The BARON.—"Ah, I forgot the £5000 you last borrowed."

EGERTON.—"No; I reserve that sum for another purpose."

The BARON (with a forced laugh).—"Perhaps to defend yourself against the actions you apprehend from me?"

EGERTON.—"You are mistaken. But, to soothe your suspicions, I will tell you plainly, that finding any sum I might have insured on my life would be liable to debts preincurred, and (as you will be my sole creditor) might thus at my death pass back to you; and doubting whether, indeed, any office would accept my insurance, I appropriate that sum to the relief of my conscience. I intend to bestow it, while yet in life, upon my late wife's kinsman, Randal Leslie. And it is solely the wish to do what I consider an act of justice that has prevailed with me to accept a favour from the hands of Harley L'Estrange, and to become again the member for Lansmere."

The Baron.—"Ha!—Lansmere! You will stand for Lansmere?"

Egerton (wincing).—"I propose to do so."

The Baron.—"I believe you will be opposed, subjected to even sharp contest. Perhaps you may lose your election."

Egerton.—"If so, I resign myself, and you can foreclose on my estates."

The Baron (his brow clearing).—"Look you, Egerton, I shall be too happy to do you a favour."

Egerton (with stateliness).—"Favour! No, Baron Levy, I ask from you no favour. Dismiss all thought of rendering me one. It is but a consideration of business on both sides. If you think it better that we shall at once settle our accounts, my lawyer shall investigate them. If you agree to the delay I request, my lawyer shall give you no trouble; and all that I have, except hope and character, pass to your hands without a struggle."

The Baron.—"Inflexible and ungracious, favour or not—put it as you will—I accede, provided, first, that you allow me to draw up a fresh deed, which will accomplish your part of the compact; and, secondly, that we saddle the proposed delay with the condition that you do not lose your election."

Egerton.—"Agreed. Have you anything further to say?"

The Baron.—"Nothing, except that, if you require more money, I am still at your service."

Egerton.—"I thank you. No; I shall take the occasion of my retirement from office to reduce my establishment. I have calculated already, and provided for the expenditure I need, up to the date I have specified, and I shall have no occasion to touch the £5000 that I still retain."

"Your young friend Mr Leslie ought to be very grateful to you," said the Baron, rising. "I have met him in the world—a lad of much promise and talent. You should try and get him also into Parliament."

Egerton (thoughtfully).—"You are a good judge of the practical abilities and merits of men, as regards worldly success. Do you really think Randal Leslie calculated for public life—for a Parliamentary career?"

The Baron.—"Indeed I do."

Egerton (speaking more to himself than Levy).—"Parliament without fortune—'tis a sharp trial; still he is prudent, abstemious, energetic, persevering; and at the onset, under my auspices and advice, he might establish a position beyond his years."

The Baron.—"It strikes me that we might possibly get him into the next Parliament; or, as that is not likely to last long, at all events into the Parliament to follow—not for one of the boroughs, which will be swept away, but for a permanent seat, and without expense.

Egerton.—"Ay—and how?"

The Baron.—"Give me a few days to consider. An idea has occurred to me. I will call again if I find it practicable. Good day to you, Egerton, and success to your election for Lansmere.

CHAPTER VII.

Peschiera had not been so inactive as he had appeared to Harley and the reader. On the contrary, he had prepared the way for his ultimate design, with all the craft and the unscrupulous resolution which belonged to his nature. His object was to compel Riccabocca into assenting to the Count's marriage with Violante, or, failing that, to ruin all chance of his kinsman's restoration. Quietly and secretly he had sought out, amongst the most needy and unprincipled of his own countrymen, those whom he could suborn to depose to Riccabocca's participation in plots and conspiracies against the Austrian dominion. These his former connection with the Carbonari enabled him to track to their refuge in London; and his knowledge of the characters he had to deal with fitted him well for the villanous task he undertook.

He had, therefore, already selected out of these desperadoes a sufficient number, either to serve as witnesses against his kinsman, or to aid him in any more audacious scheme which circumstance might suggest to his adoption. Meanwhile he had (as Harley had suspected he would) set spies upon Randal's movements;

and the day before that young traitor confided to him Violante's retreat, he had, at least, got scent of her father's.

The discovery that Violante was under a roof so honoured, and seemingly so safe as Lord Lansmere's, did not discourage this bold and desperate adventurer. We have seen him set forth to reconnoitre the house at Knightsbridge. He had examined it well, and discovered the quarter which he judged favourable to a *coup de main*, should that become necessary.

Lord Lansmere's house and grounds were surrounded by a wall, the entrance being to the high-road, and by a porter's lodge. At the rear there lay fields crossed by a lane or by-road. To these fields a small door in the wall, which was used by the gardeners in passing to and from their work, gave communication. This door was usually kept locked; but the lock was of the rude and simple description common to such entrances, and easily opened by a skeleton key. So far there was no obstacle which Peschiera's experience in conspiracy and gallantry did not disdain as trivial. But the Count was not disposed to abrupt and violent means in the first instance. He had a confidence in his personal gifts, in his address, in his previous triumphs over the sex, which made him naturally desire to hazard the effect of a personal interview; and on this he resolved with his wonted audacity. Randal's description of Violante's personal appearance, and such suggestions as to her character, and the motives most likely to influence her actions, as that young lynx-eyed observer could bestow, were all that the Count required of present aid from his accomplice.

Meanwhile we return to Violante herself. We see her now seated in the gardens at Knightsbridge, side by side with Helen. The place was retired, and out of sight from the windows of the house.

Violante.—"But why will you not tell me more of that early time? You are less communicative even than Leonard."

Helen (looking down, and hesitatingly).—"Indeed there is nothing to tell you that you do not know; and it is so long since, and things are so changed now."

The tone of the last words was mournful, and the words ended with a sigh.

Violante (with enthusiasm).—"How I envy you that past which you treat so lightly! To have been something, even in childhood, to the formation of a noble nature; to have borne on those slight shoulders half the load of a man's grand labour. And now to see Genius moving calm in its clear career; and to say inly, 'Of that genius I am a part!'"

Helen (sadly and humbly).—"A part! Oh, no! A part? I don't understand you."

Violante.—"Take the child Beatrice from Dante's life, and should we have a Dante? What is a poet's genius but the voice of its emotions? All things in life and in nature influence genius; but what influences it the most are its own sorrows and affections."

Helen looks softly into Violante's eloquent face, and draws nearer to her in tender silence.

VIOLANTE (suddenly).—"Yes, Helen, yes—I know by my own heart how to read yours. Such memories are ineffaceable. Few guess what strange self-weavers of our own destinies we women are in our veriest childhood!" She sunk her voice into a whisper. "How could Leonard fail to be dear to you—dear as you to him—dearer than all others?"

HELEN (shrinking back, and greatly disturbed).—"Hush, hush! you must not speak to me thus; it is wicked—I cannot bear it. I would not have it be so—it must not be—it cannot!"

She clasped her hands over her eyes for a moment, and then lifted her face, and the face was very sad, but very calm.

VIOLANTE (twining her arm round Helen's waist).—"How have I wounded you?—how offended? Forgive me—but why is this wicked? Why must it not be? Is it because he is below you in birth?"

HELEN.—"No, no—I never thought of that. And what am I? Don't ask me—I cannot answer. You are wrong, quite wrong, as to me. I can only look on Leonard as—as a brother. But—but you can speak to him more freely than I can. I would not have him waste his heart on me, nor yet think me unkind and distant, as I seem. I know not what I say. But—but—break to him—indirectly—gently—that duty in both forbids us both to—to be more than friends—than——"

"Helen, Helen!" cried Violante, in her warm, generous passion, "your heart betrays you in every word you say. You weep; lean on me, whisper to me; why—why is this? Do you fear that your guardian would not consent? He not consent? He who——"

Helen.—"Cease—cease—cease."

Violante.—"What! You can fear Harley—Lord L'Estrange? Fie; you do not know him."

Helen (rising suddenly).—"Violante, hold; I am engaged to another."

Violante rose also, and stood still, as if turned to stone; pale as death, till the blood came, at first slowly, then with suddenness from her heart, and one deep glow suffused her whole countenance. She caught Helen's hand firmly, and said, in a hollow voice—

"Another! Engaged to another! One word, Helen—not to him—not to Harley—to——"

"I cannot say—I must not. I have promised," cried poor Helen, and as Violante let fall her hand, she hurried away.

Violante sate down, mechanically; she felt as if stunned by a mortal blow. She closed her eyes and breathed hard. A deadly faintness seized her; and when it passed away, it seemed to her as if she were no longer the same being, nor the world around her the same world—as if she were but one sense of intense, hopeless misery, and as if the universe were but one inanimate void. So strangely immaterial are we really—we human beings, with flesh and blood—that if you suddenly abstract from us but a single, impalpable, airy thought, which our souls have cherished, you seem to curdle the air, to extinguish the sun, to snap every link that connects us to matter, and to benumb everything into death, except woe.

And this warm, young, southern nature, but a moment before was so full of joy, and life, and vigorous lofty hope. It never till now had known its own intensity and depth. The virgin had never lifted the veil from her own soul of woman. What till then had Harley L'Estrange been to Violante? An ideal—a dream of some imagined excellence—a type of poetry in the midst of the common world. It had not been Harley the man—it had been Harley the Phantom. She had never said to herself, "He is identified with my love—my hopes, my home, my future." How could she? Of such, he himself had never spoken; an internal voice, indeed, had vaguely, yet irresistibly, whispered to her that, despite his light words, his feelings towards her were grave and deep. O false voice! how it had deceived her! Her quick convictions seized the all that Helen had left unsaid. And now suddenly she felt what it is to love, and what it is to despair. So she sate, crushed and solitary, neither murmuring nor weeping, only now and then passing her hand across her brow, as if to clear away some cloud that would not be dispersed; or heaving a deep sigh, as if to throw off some load that no time henceforth could remove. There are certain moments in life in which we say to ourselves, "All is over; no matter what else changes, that which I have made my all is gone evermore—evermore." And our own thought rings back in our ears, "Evermore—evermore!"

CHAPTER VIII.

As Violante thus sate, a stranger, passing stealthily through the trees, stood between herself and the evening sun. She saw him not. He paused a moment, and then spoke low, in her native tongue, addressing her by the name which she had borne in Italy. He spoke as a relation, and excused his intrusion; "For," said he, "I come to suggest to the daughter the means by which she can restore to her father his country and his honours."

At the word "father," Violante roused herself, and all her love for that father rushed back upon her with double force. It does so ever—we love most our parents at the moment when some tie less holy is abruptly broken; and when the conscience says, "*There*, at least, is a love that has never deceived thee!"

She saw before her a man of mild aspect and princely form. Peschiera (for it was he) had banished from his dress, as from his countenance, all that betrayed the worldly levity of his character. He was acting a part, and he dressed and looked it.

"My father!" she said, quickly, and in Italian. "What of him? And who are you, signor? I know you not."

Peschiera smiled benignly, and replied in a tone in which great respect was softened by a kind of parental tenderness.

"Suffer me to explain, and listen to me while I speak." Then, quietly seating himself on the bench beside her, he looked into her eyes, and resumed.

"Doubtless, you have heard of the Count di Peschiera?"

VIOLANTE.—"I heard that name as a child, when in Italy. And when she with whom I then dwelt (my father's aunt), fell ill and died, I was told that my home in Italy was gone, that it had passed to the Count di Peschiera—my father's foe."

PESCHIERA.—"And your father, since then, has taught you to hate this fancied foe?"

VIOLANTE.—"Nay; my father did but forbid me ever to breathe his name."

PESCHIERA.—"Alas! what years of suffering and exile might have been saved your father, had he but been more just to his early friend and kinsman; nay, had he but less cruelly concealed the secret of his retreat. Fair child, I am that Giulio Franzini, that Count di Peschiera. I am the man you have been told to regard as your father's foe. I am the man on whom the Austrian Emperor bestowed his lands. And now judge if I am, in truth, the foe. I have come hither to seek your father, in order to dispossess myself of my sovereign's gift. I have come but with one desire, to restore Alphonso to his native land, and to surrender the heritage that was forced upon me."

VIOLANTE.—"My father, my dear father! His grand heart will have room once more. Oh! this is noble enmity, true revenge. I understand it, signor, and so will my father, for such would have been his revenge on you. You have seen him."

PESCHIERA.—"No, not yet. I would not see him till I had seen yourself; for you, in truth, are the arbiter of his destinies as of mine?"

VIOLANTE.—"I—Count? I arbiter of my father's destinies? Is it possible?"

PESCHIERA (with a look of compassionate admiration, and in a tone yet more emphatically parental).—"How lovely is that innocent joy; but do not indulge it yet. Perhaps it is a sacrifice which is asked from you—a sacrifice too hard to bear. Do not interrupt me. Listen still, and you will see why I could not speak to your father until I had obtained an interview with yourself.—See why a word from you may continue still to banish me from his presence. You know, doubtless, that your father was one of the chiefs of a party that sought to free Northern Italy from the Austrians. I myself was at the onset a warm participator in that scheme. In a sudden moment I discovered that some of its more active projectors had coupled with a patriotic enterprise plots of a dark nature, and that the conspiracy itself was about to be betrayed to the government. I wished to consult with your father; but he was at a distance. I learned that his life was condemned. Not an hour was to be lost. I took a bold resolve, that has exposed me to his suspicions, and to my country's wrath. But my main idea was to save him, my early friend, from death, and my country from fruitless massacre. I withdrew from the intended revolt. I sought at once the head of the Austrain government in Italy, and made terms for the lives of Alphonso, and of the other more illustrious chiefs, which otherwise would have been forfeited. I obtained permission to undertake myself the charge of securing my kinsman in order to place him in safety, and to conduct him to a foreign land, in an exile that would cease when the danger was dispelled. But unhappily he deemed that I only sought to destroy him. He fled from my friendly pursuit. The soldiers with me were attacked by an intermeddling Englishman; your father escaped from Italy—concealing his retreat; and the character of his flight counteracted my efforts to obtain his pardon. The government conferred on me half his revenues, holding the other half at its pleasure. I accepted the offer in order to save his whole heritage from confiscation. That I did not convey to him what I pined to do—viz. the information that I held but in trust what was bestowed by the government, and the full explanation of what seemed blamable in my conduct—was necessarily owing to the secresy he maintained. I could not discover his refuge; but I never ceased to plead for his recall. This year only I have partially succeeded. He can be restored to his heritage and rank, on one proviso—a guarantee for his loyalty. That guarantee the government has named: it is the alliance of his only child with one whom the government can trust.

It was the interest of all the Italian nobility, that the representation of a house so great falling to a female, should not pass away wholly from the direct line;—in a word, that you should ally yourself with a kinsman. But one kinsman, and he the next in blood, presented himself. In short — Alphonso regains all that he lost on the day in which his daughter gives her hand to Giulio Franzini, Count di Peschiera. Ah," continued the Count, mournfully, "you shrink —you recoil. He thus submitted to your choice is indeed unworthy of you. You are scarce in the spring of life. He is in its waning autumn. Youth loves youth. He does not aspire to your love. All that he can say is, love is not the only joy of the heart—it is joy to raise from ruin a beloved father—joy to restore to a land poor in all but memories, a chief in whom it reverences a line of heroes. These are the joys I offer to you—you, a daughter, and an Italian maid. Still silent! Oh, speak to me!"

Certainly this Count Peschiera knew well how woman is to be wooed and won; and never was woman more sensitive to those high appeals which most move all true earnest womanhood, than was the young Violante. Fortune favoured him in the moment chosen. Harley was wrenched away from her hopes, and love a word erased from her language. In the void of the world, her father's image alone stood clear and visible. And she who from infancy had so pined to serve that father, who at first learned to dream of Harley as that father's friend! She could restore to him all for which the exile sighed; and by a sacrifice of self! Self-sacrifice, ever in itself such a temptation to the noble! Still, in the midst of the confusion and disturbance of her mind, the idea of marriage with another seemed so terrible and revolting, that she could not at once conceive it; and still that instinct of openness and honour which pervaded all her character, warned even her inexperience that there was something wrong in this clandestine appeal to herself.

Again the Count besought her to speak, and with an effort she said, irresolutely—

"If it be as you say, it is not for me to answer you; it is for my father."

"Nay," replied Peschiera. "Pardon, if I contradict you. Do you know so little of your father as to suppose that he will suffer his interest to dictate to his pride? He would refuse, perhaps, even to receive my visit—to hear my explanations; but certainly he would refuse to buy back his inheritance by the sacrifice of his daughter to one whom he has deemed his foe, and whom the mere disparity of years would incline the world to say he had made the barter of his personal ambition. But if I could go to him sanctioned by you—if I could say your daughter overlooks what the father might deem an obstacle—she has consented to accept my hand of her own free choice—she unites her happiness and blends her prayers with mine—then, indeed, I could not fail of success; and Italy would pardon my errors, and bless your name.

Ah! Signorina, do not think of me, save as an instrument towards the fulfilment of duties so high and sacred—think but of your ancestors, your father, your native land, and reject not the proud occasion to prove how you revere them all!"

Violante's heart was touched at the right cord. Her head rose—the colour came back to her pale cheek—she turned the glorious beauty of her countenance towards the wily tempter. She was about to answer, and to seal her fate, when at that instant Harley's voice was heard at a little distance, and Nero came bounding towards her, and thrust himself, with rough familiarity, between her and Peschiera. The Count drew back, and Violante, whose eyes were still fixed on his face, started at the change that passed there. One quick gleam of rage sufficed in an instant to light up the sinister secrets of his nature—it was the face of the baffled gladiator. He had time but for few words.

"I must not be seen here," he muttered; "but to-morrow—in these gardens—about this hour. I implore you for the sake of your father—his hopes, fortunes, his very life, to guard the secret of this interview—to meet me again. Adieu!"

He vanished amidst the trees, and was gone—noiselessly, mysteriously, as he had come.

CHAPTER IX.

THE last words of Peschiera were still ringing in Violante's ears when Harley appeared in sight, and the sound of his voice dispelled the vague and dreamy stupor which had crept over her senses. At that voice there returned the consciousness of a mighty loss, the sting of an intolerable anguish. To meet Harley there, and thus, seemed impossible. She turned abruptly away, and hurried towards the house. Harley called to her by name, but she would not answer, and only quickened her steps. He paused a moment in surprise, and then hastened after her.

"Under what strange taboo am I placed?" said he, gaily, as he laid his hand on her shrinking arm. "I inquire for Helen—she is ill, and cannot see me. I come to sun myself in your presence, and you fly me, as if gods and men had set their mark on my brow. Child!—child!—what is this? You are weeping?"

"Do not stay me now—do not speak to me," answered Violante, through her stifling sobs, as she broke from his hand and made towards the house.

"Have you a grief, and under the shelter of my father's roof? A grief that you will not tell to me?

Cruel!" cried Harley, with inexpressible tenderness of reproach in his soft tones.

Violante could not trust herself to reply. Ashamed of her self-betrayal—softened yet more by his pleading voice—she could have prayed to the earth to swallow her. At length, checking her tears by an heroic effort, she said, almost calmly, "Noble friend, forgive me. I have no grief, believe me, which—which I can tell to you. I was but thinking of my poor father when you came up; alarming myself about him, it may be, with vain superstitious fears; and so—even a slight surprise—your abrupt appearance, has sufficed to make me thus weak and foolish; but I wish to see my father;—to go home—home!"

"Your father is well, believe me, and pleased that you are here. No danger threatens him; and you *here* are safe."

"I safe—and from what?"

Harley mused irresolute. He inclined to confide to her the danger which her father had concealed; but had he the right to do so against her father's will?

"Give me," he said, "time to reflect, and to obtain permission to intrust you with a secret which, in my judgment, you should know. Meanwhile, this much I may say, that rather than you should incur the danger that I believe he exaggerates, your father would have given you a protector—even in Randal Leslie."

Violante started.

"But," resumed Harley, with a calm, in which a certain deep mournfulness was apparent, unconsciously to himself—"but I trust you are reserved for a fairer fate and a nobler spouse. I have vowed to live henceforth in the common workday world. But for you, bright child, for you I am a dreamer still!"

Violante turned her eyes for one instant towards the melancholy speaker. The look thrilled to his heart. He bowed his face involuntarily. When he looked up, she had left his side. He did not this time attempt to follow her, but moved away and plunged amidst the leafless trees.

An hour afterwards he re-entered the house, and again sought to see Helen. She had now recovered sufficiently to give him the interview he requested.

He approached her with a grave and serious gentleness.

"My dear Helen," said he, "you have consented to be my wife, my life's mild companion; let it be soon—soon—for I need you. I need all the strength of that holy tie. Helen, let me press you to fix the time."

"I owe you too much," answered Helen, looking down, "to have any will but yours. But your mother," she added, perhaps clinging to the idea of some reprieve—"your mother has not yet——"

"My mother—true. I will speak first to her. You shall receive from my family all honour due to your gentle virtues. Helen, by the way, have you mentioned to Violante the bond between us?"

"No—that is, I fear I may have unguardedly betrayed it, against Lady Lansmere's commands too—but—but——"

"So Lady Lansmere forbade you to name it to Violante. This should not be. I will answer for her permission to revoke that interdict. It is due to Violante and to you. Tell your young friend all. Ah, Helen, if I am at times cold or wayward, bear with me—bear with me; for you love me, do you not?"

CHAPTER X.

THAT same evening Randal heard from Levy (at whose house he stayed late) of that self-introduction to Violante which (thanks to his skeleton-key) Peschiera had contrived to effect; and the Count seemed more than sanguine—he seemed assured as to the full and speedy success of his matrimonial enterprise. "Therefore," said Levy, "I trust I may very soon congratulate you on the acquisition of your family estates."

"Strange!" answered Randal, "strange that my fortunes seem so bound up with the fate of a foreigner like Beatrice di Negra and her connection with Frank Hazeldean." He looked up at the clock as he spoke, and added—

"Frank by this time has told his father of his engagement."

"And you feel sure that the Squire cannot be coaxed into consent?"

"No; but I feel sure that the Squire will be so choleric at the first intelligence, that Frank will not have the self-control necessary for coaxing; and, perhaps, before the Squire can relent upon this point, he may by some accident learn his grievances on another, which would exasperate him still more."

"Ay, I understand—the *post obit?*"

Randal nodded.

"And what then?" asked Levy.

"The next of kin to the lands of Hazeldean may have his day."

The Baron smiled.

"You have good prospects in that direction, Leslie: look now to another. I spoke to you of the borough of Lansmere. Your patron, Audley Egerton, intends to stand for it."

Randal's heart had of late been so set upon other and more avaricious schemes, that a seat in Parliament had sunk into a secondary object; nevertheless his ambitious and all-grasping nature felt a bitter pang, when he heard that Egerton thus interposed between himself and any chance of advancement.

"So!" he muttered, sullenly—"so. This man, who pretends to be my benefactor, squanders away the wealth of my forefathers—throws me penniless on the world; and, while still encouraging me to exertion and public life, robs me himself of——"

"No!" interrupted Levy—"not robs you; we may prevent that. The Lansmere interest is not so strong in the borough as Dick Avenel's."

"But I cannot stand against Egerton."

"Assuredly not—you may stand with him."

"How?"

Dick Avenel will never suffer Egerton to come in; and though he cannot, perhaps, carry two of his own politics, he can split his votes upon you."

Randal's eyes flashed. He saw at a glance, that if Avenel did not overrate the relative strength of parties, his seat could be secured.

"But," he said, "Egerton has not spoken to me on such a subject; nor can you expect that he would propose to me to stand with him, if he foresaw the chance of being ousted by the very candidate he himself introduced."

"Neither he nor his party will anticipate that possibility. If he ask you, agree to stand—leave the rest to me."

"You must hate Egerton bitterly," said Randal; "for I am not vain enough to think that you thus scheme but from pure love to me."

"The motives of men are intricate and complicated," answered Levy, with unusual seriousness. "It suffices to the wise to profit by the actions, and leave the motives in shade."

There was silence for some minutes. Then the two drew closer towards each other, and began to discuss details in their joint designs.

Randal walked home slowly. It was a cold moonlit night. Young idlers of his own years and rank passed him by, on their way from the haunts of social pleasure. They were yet in the first fair holiday of life. Life's holiday had gone from him for ever. Graver men, in the various callings of masculine labour—professions, trade, the state—passed him also. Their steps might be sober, and their faces careworn; but no step had the furtive stealth of his—no face the same contracted, sinister, suspicious gloom. Only once, in a lonely thoroughfare, and on the opposite side of the way, fell a footfall, and glanced an eye, that seemed to betray a soul in sympathy with Randal Leslie's.

And Randal, who had heeded none of the other passengers by the way, as if instinctively, took note of this one. His nerves crisped at the noiseless slide of that form, as it stalked on from lamp to lamp, keeping pace with his own. He felt a sort of awe, as if he had beheld the wraith of himself; and ever as he glanced suspiciously at the stranger, the stranger glanced at him. He was inexpressibly relieved when the figure turned down another street and vanished.

That man was a felon, as yet undetected. Between him and his kind there stood but a thought—a veil air-spun, but impassable, as the veil of the image at Sais.

And thus moved and thus looked Randal Leslie, a thing of dark and secret mischief—within the pale of the law, but equally removed from man by the vague consciousness that at his heart lay that which the eyes of man would abhor and loathe. Solitary amidst the vast city, and on through the machinery of Civilisation, went the still spirit of Intellectual Evil.

CHAPTER XI.

Early the next morning Randal received two notes—one from Frank, written in great agitation, begging Randal to see and propitiate his father, whom he feared he had grievously offended; and then running off, rather incoherently, into protestations that his honour as well as his affections were engaged irrevocably to Beatrice, and that her, at least, he could never abandon.

And the second note was from the Squire himself—short, and far less cordial than usual—requesting Mr Leslie to call on him.

Randal dressed in haste, and went first to Limmer's hotel.

He found the Parson with Mr Hazeldean, and endeavouring in vain to soothe him. The Squire had not slept all night, and his appearance was almost haggard.

"Oho! Mr young Leslie," said he, throwing himself back in his chair as Randal entered—"I thought you were a friend—I thought you were Frank's adviser. Explain, sir; explain."

"Gently, my dear Mr Hazeldean," said the Parson.

"You do but surprise and alarm Mr Leslie. Tell him more distinctly what he has to explain."

SQUIRE.—"Did you, or did you not, tell me or Mrs Hazeldean, that Frank was in love with Violante Rickeybockey?"

RANDAL (as in amaze).—"I! Never, sir; I feared, on the contrary, that he was somewhat enamoured of a very different person. I hinted at that possibility; I could not do more, for I did not know how far Frank's affections were seriously engaged. And indeed, sir, Mrs Hazeldean, though not encouraging the idea that your son could marry a foreigner and a Roman Catholic, did not appear to consider such objections insuperable, if Frank's happiness were really at stake.

Here the poor Squire gave way to a burst of passion, that involved in one tempest, Frank, Randal, Harry herself, and the whole race of foreigners, Roman Catholics, and women. While the Squire was still incapable of hearing reason, the Parson, taking aside Randal, convinced himself that the whole affair, so far as Randal was concerned, had its origin in a very natural mistake; and that while that young gentleman had been hinting at Beatrice, Mrs Hazeldean had been thinking of Violante. With considerable difficulty he succeeded in conveying this explanation to the Squire, and somewhat appeasing his wrath against Randal. And the Dissimulator, seizing his occasion, then expressed so much grief and astonishment at learning that matters had gone as far as the Parson informed him—that Frank had actually proposed to Beatrice, been accepted, and engaged himself, before even communicating with his father; he declared so earnestly, that he could never conjecture such evil—that he had had Frank's positive promise to take no step without the sanction of his parents; he professed such sympathy with the Squire's wounded feelings, and such regret at Frank's involvement, that Mr Hazeldean at last yielded up his honest heart to his consoler—and griping Randal's hand, said, "Well, well, I wronged you—beg your pardon. What now is to be done?"

"Why, you cannot consent to this marriage—impossible," replied Randal; "and we must hope, therefore, to influence Frank by his sense of duty."

"That's it," said the Squire; "for I'll not give way. Pretty pass things have come to, indeed! A widow, too, I hear. Artful jade—thought, no doubt, to catch a Hazeldean of Hazeldean. My estates go to an outlandish Papistical set of mongrel brats! No, no, never!"

"But," said the Parson, mildly, "perhaps we may be unjustly prejudiced against this lady. We should have consented to Violante—why not to her? She is of good family?"

"Certainly," said Randal.

"And good character?"

Randal shook his head, and sighed. The Squire caught him roughly by the arm—"Answer the Parson!" cried he, vehemently.

"Indeed, sir, I cannot speak disrespectfully of the character of a woman,—who may, too, become Frank's wife; and the world is ill-natured, and not to be believed. But you can judge for yourself, my dear Mr Hazeldean. Ask your brother whether Madame di Negra is one whom he would advise his nephew to marry."

"My brother!" exclaimed the Squire, furiously. "Consult my distant brother on the affairs of my own son?"

"He is a man of the world," put in Randal.

"And of feeling and honour," said the Parson: "and, perhaps, through him, we may be enabled to enlighten Frank, and save him from what appears to be the snare of an artful woman."

"Meanwhile," said Randal, "I will seek Frank, and do my best with him. Let me go now—I will return in an hour or so."

"I will accompany you," said the Parson.

"Nay, pardon me; but I think we too young men can talk more openly without a third person, even so wise and kind as you."

"Let Randal go," growled the Squire. And Randal went.

He spent some time with Frank, and the reader will easily divine how that time was employed. As he left Frank's lodgings, he found himself suddenly seized by the Squire himself.

"I was too impatient to stay at home and listen to the Parson's prosing," said Mr Hazeldean, nervously. "I have shaken Dale off. Tell me what has passed. Oh! don't fear—I'm a man, and can bear the worst."

Randal drew the Squire's arm within his, and led him into the adjacent park.

"My dear sir," said he, sorrowfully, "this is very confidential what I am about to say. I must repeat it to you, because, without such confidence, I see not how to advise you on the proper course to take. But if I betray Frank, it is for his good, and to his own father;—only do not tell him. He would never forgive me—it would for ever destroy my influence over him."

"Go on, go on," gasped the Squire; "speak out. I'll never tell the ungrateful boy that I learned his secrets from another."

"Then," said Randal, "the secret of his entanglement with Madame di Negra is simply this—he found her in debt—nay on the point of being arrested——"

"Debt!—arrested! Jezebel!"

"And in paying the debt himself, and saving her from arrest, he conferred on her the obligation which no woman of honour could accept save from an affianced husband. Poor Frank!—if sadly taken in, still we must pity and forgive him!"

Suddenly, to Randal's great surprise, the Squire's whole face brightened up.

"I see, I see!" he exclaimed, slapping his thigh. "I have it—I have it. 'Tis an affair of money! I can buy her off. If she took money from him, the mercenary, painted baggage! why then, she'll take it from me. I don't care what it costs—half my fortune—all! I'd be content never to see Hazeldean Hall again, if I could save my son, my own son, from disgrace and misery; for miserable he will be, when he knows he has broken my heart and his mother's. And for a creature like that! My boy, a thousand hearty thanks to you. Where does the wench live? I'll go to her at once." And, as he spoke, the Squire actually pulled out his pocket-book, and began turning over and counting the bank-notes in it.

Randal at first tried to combat this bold resolution on the part of the Squire; but Mr Hazeldean had seized on it with all the obstinacy of his straightforward English mind. He cut Randal's persuasive eloquence off in the midst.

"Don't waste your breath. I've settled it; and if you don't tell me where she lives, 'tis easily found out, I suppose."

Randal mused a moment. "After all," thought he, "why not? He will be sure so to speak as to enlist her pride against himself, and to irritate Frank to the utmost. Let him go."

Accordingly, he gave the information required; and, insisting with great earnestness on the Squire's promise not to mention to Madame di Negra his knowledge of Frank's pecuniary aid (for that would betray Randal as the informant); and satisfying himself as he best might with the Squire's prompt assurance, "that he knew how to settle matters, without saying why or wherefore, as long as he opened his purse wide enough," he accompanied Mr Hazeldean back into the streets, and there left him—fixing an hour in the evening for an interview at Limmer's, and hinting that it would be best to have that interview without the presence of the Parson. "Excellent, good man," said Randal, "but not with sufficient knowledge of the world for affairs of this kind, which *you* understand so well."

"I should think so," quoth the Squire, who had quite recovered his good humour. "And the Parson is as soft as buttermilk. We must be firm here—firm, sir." And the Squire struck the end of his stick on the pavement, nodded to Randal, and went on to May-Fair as sturdily and as confidently as if to purchase a prize-cow at a cattle-show.

CHAPTER XII.

"Bring the light nearer," said John Burley—"nearer still."

Leonard obeyed, and placed the candle on a little table by the sick man's bedside.

Burley's mind was partially wandering; but there was method in his madness. Horace Walpole said that "his stomach would survive all the rest of him." That which in Burley survived the last was his quaint wild genius. He looked wistfully at the still flame of the candle. "It lives ever in the air!" said he.

"What lives ever?"

Burley's voice swelled—"Light!" He turned from Leonard, and again contemplated the little flame. "In the fixed star, in the Will-o'-the-wisp, in the great sun that illumes half a world, or the farthing rushlight by which the ragged student strains his eyes—still the same flower of the elements! Light in the universe, thought in the soul—ay—ay—Go on with the simile. My head swims. Extinguish the light! You cannot; fool, it vanishes from your eye, but it is still in the space. Worlds must perish, suns shrivel up, matter and spirit both fall into nothingness, before the combinations whose union makes that little flame, which the breath of a babe can restore to darkness, shall lose the power to form themselves into light once more. Lose the power!—no, the *necessity*;—it is the one *Must* in creation. Ay, ay, very dark riddles grow clear now—now when I could not cast up an addition sum in the baker's bill! What wise man denied that two and two made four? Do they not make four? I can't answer him. But I could answer a question that some wise men have contrived to make much knottier." He smiled softly, and turned his face for some minutes to the wall.

This was the second night on which Leonard had watched by his bedside, and Burley's state had grown rapidly worse. He could not last many days, perhaps many hours. But he had evinced an emotion beyond mere delight at seeing Leonard again. He had since then been calmer, more himself. "I feared I might have ruined you by my bad example," he said, with a touch of humour that became pathos as he added, "That idea preyed on me."

"No, no; you did me great good."

"Say that—say it often," said Burley, earnestly; "it makes my heart feel so light."

He had listened to Leonard's story with deep interest, and was fond of talking to him of little Helen. He detected the secret at the young man's heart, and cheered the hopes that lay there, amidst fears and sorrows. Burley never talked seriously of his repentance; it was not in his nature to talk seriously of the things which he felt solemnly. But his high animal spirits were quenched with the animal power that fed them. Now, we go out of our sensual existence only when we are no longer enthralled by the Present, in which the senses have their realm. The sensual being vanishes when we are in the Past or the Future. The Present was gone from Burley; he could no more be its slave and its king.

It was most touching to see how the inner character of this man unfolded itself, as the leaves of the outer character fell off and withered — a character no one would have guessed in him—an inherent refinement that was almost womanly; and he had all a woman's abnegation of self—he took the cares lavished on him so meekly. As the features of the old man return in the stillness of death to the aspect of youth—the lines effaced, the wrinkles gone—so, in seeing Burley now, you saw what he had been in his spring of promise. But he himself saw only what he had failed to be—powers squandered—life wasted. "I once beheld," he said, "a ship in a storm. It was a cloudy, fitful day, and I could see the ship with all its masts fighting hard for life and for death. Then came night, dark as pitch, and I could only guess that the ship fought on.—Towards the dawn the stars grew visible, and once more I saw the ship—it was a wreck—it went down just as the stars shone forth."

When he had made that allusion to himself, he sat very still for some time, then he spread out his wasted hands, and gazed on them, and on his shrunken limbs. "Good," said he, laughing low; "these hands were too large and rude for handling the delicate webs of my own mechanism, and these strong limbs ran away with me. If I had been a sickly, puny fellow, perhaps my mind would have had fair play. There was too much of brute body here! Look at this hand now! you can see the light through it! Good, good!"

Now, that evening, until he had retired to bed, Burley had been unusually cheerful, and had talked with much of his old eloquence, if with little of his old humour. Amongst other matters, he had spoken with considerable interest of some poems and other papers in manuscript which had been left in the house by a former lodger, and which the reader may remember that Mrs Goodyer had urged him in vain to read, in his last visit to her cottage. But *then* he had her husband Jacob to chat with and the spirit-bottle to finish; and the wild craving for excitement plucked his thoughts back to his London revels. Now poor Jacob was dead, and it was not brandy that the sick man drank from the widow's cruse. And London lay afar amidst its fogs, like a world resolved back into nebulæ. So, to please his hostess and distract his own solitary thoughts, he had condescended (just before Leonard found him out) to peruse the memorials of a life obscure to the world, and new to his own experience of coarse joys and woes. "I have been making a romance, to amuse myself, from their contents," said he. "They may be of use to you, brother author. I have told Mrs Goodyer to place them in your room. Amongst those papers is a sort of journal—a woman's journal; it moved me greatly. A man gets into another world, strange to him as the orb of Sirius, if he can transport himself into the centre of a woman's heart, and see the life there, so wholly unlike our own. Things of moment to us, to it so trivial: things trifling to us, to it so vast. There was this journal — in its dates reminding me of stormy events in my own existence, and grand doings in the world's. And those dates there, chronicling but the mysterious unrevealed record of some obscure loving heart! And in that chronicle, O Sir Poet, there was as much genius, vigour of thought, vitality of being, poured and wasted, as ever kind friend will say was lavished on the rude outer world by big John Burley! Genius, genius; are we all alike, then, save when we leash ourselves to some matter-of-fact material, and float over the roaring seas on a wooden plank or a herring-tub?" And after he had uttered that cry of a secret anguish, John Burley had begun to show symptoms of growing fever and disturbed brain; and when they had got him into bed, he lay there muttering to himself, until towards midnight he had asked Leonard to bring the light nearer to him.

So now he again was quiet—with his face turned towards the wall; and Leonard stood by the bedside sorrowfully, and Mrs Goodyer, who did not heed Burley's talk, and thought only of his physical state, was dipping clothes into iced water to apply to his forehead. But as she approached with these, and addressed him soothingly, Burley raised himself on his arm, and waved aside the bandages. "I do not need them," said he, in a collected voice. I am better now. I and that pleasant light understand one another, and I believe all it tells me. Pooh, pooh, I do not rave." He looked so smilingly and so kindly into her face, that the poor woman, who loved him as her own son, fairly burst into tears. He drew her towards him, and kissed her forehead.

"Peace, old fool," said he, fondly. "You shall tell anglers hereafter how John Burley came to fish for the one-eyed perch which he never caught; and how, when he gave it up at the last, his baits all gone, and the line broken amongst the weeds, you comforted the baffled man. There are many good fellows yet in the world who will like to know that poor Burley did not die on a dunghill. Kiss me! Come, boy, you too. Now, God bless you, I should like to sleep." His cheeks were wet with the tears of both his listeners, and there was a moisture in his own eyes, which, nevertheless, beamed bright through the moisture.

He laid himself down again, and the old woman would have withdrawn the light. He moved uneasily. "Not that," he murmured—light to the last!" And putting forth his wan hand, he drew aside the curtain, so that the light might fall full on his face. In a few minutes he was asleep, breathing calmly and regularly as an infant.

The old woman wiped her eyes, and drew Leonard softly into the adjoining room, in which a bed had been made up for him. He had not left the house since he had entered it with Dr Morgan. "You are young, sir," said she, with kindness, "and the young want sleep. Lie down a bit: I will call you when he wakes."

"No, I could not sleep," said Leonard. "I will watch for you."

The old woman shook her head. "I must see the last of him, sir; but I know he will be angry when his eyes open on me, for he has grown very thoughtful of others."

"Ah, if he had but been as thoughtful of himself!" murmured Leonard; and he seated himself by the table, on which, as he leaned his elbow, he dislodged some papers placed there. They fell to the ground with a dumb, moaning, sighing sound.

"What is that?" said he, starting.

The old woman picked up the manuscripts, and smoothed them carefully.

"Ah, sir, he bade me place these papers here. He thought they might keep you from fretting about him, in case you would sit up and wake. And he had a thought of me, too; for I have so pined to find out the poor young lady who left them years ago. She was almost as dear to me as he is; dearer perhaps until now —when—when I am about to lose him!"

Leonard turned from the papers, without a glance at their contents: they had no interest for him at such a moment.

The hostess went on—

"Perhaps she is gone to Heaven before him; she did not look like one long for this world. She left us so suddenly. Many things of hers besides these papers are still here ; but I keep them aired and dusted, and strew lavender over them, in case she ever come for them again. You never heard tell of her, did you, sir ? " she added, with great simplicity, and dropping a half-curtsy.

"Of her—of whom ?"

" Did not Mr John tell you her name—dear—dear ; Mrs Bertram."

Leonard started ; the very name so impressed upon his memory by Harley L'Estrange.

" Bertram ! " he repeated. " Are you sure ? "

" Oh yes, sir ! And many years after she had left us, and we had heard no more of her, there came a packet addressed to her here, from over sea, sir. We took it in, and kept it, and John would break the seal, to know if it would tell us anything about her ; but it was all in a foreign language like—we could not read a word."

" Have you the packet ? Pray show it to me. It may be of the greatest value. To-morrow will do—I cannot think of that just now. Poor Burley ! "

Leonard's manner indicated that he wished to talk no more, and to be alone. So Mrs Goodyer left him, and stole back to Burley's room on tiptoe.

The young man remained in deep reverie for some moments. " Light," he murmured. " How often 'Light' is the last word of those round whom the shades are gathering ! " * He moved, and straight on

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* Every one remembers that Goethe's last words are said to have been, " More light ; " and perhaps what has occurred in the text may

his view through the cottage lattice there streamed light, indeed—not the miserable ray lit by a human hand—but the still and holy effulgence of a moonlit heaven. It lay broad upon the humble floors—pierced across the threshold of the death-chamber, and halted clear amidst its shadows.

Leonard stood motionless, his eye following the silvery silent splendour.

"And," he said inly—"and does this large erring nature, marred by its genial faults—this soul which should have filled a land, as yon orb the room, with a light that linked earth to heaven—does it pass away into the dark, and leave not a ray behind? Nay, if the elements of light are ever in the space, and when the flame goes out return to the vital air—so thought, once kindled, lives for ever around and about us, a part of our breathing atmosphere. Many a thinker, many a poet, may yet illumine the world, from the thoughts which yon genius, that will have no name, gave forth to wander through air, and recombine again in some new form of light."

Thus he went on in vague speculations, seeking, as

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be supposed a plagiarism from those words. But, in fact, nothing is more common than the craving and demand for light a little before death. Let any consult his own sad experience in the last moments of those whose gradual close he has watched and tended. What more frequent than a prayer to open the shutters and let in the sun? What complaint more repeated, and more touching, than "that it is growing dark?" I once knew a sufferer—who did not then seem in immediate danger, suddenly order the sick-room to be lit up as if for a gala. When this was told to the physician, he said gravely, "No worse sign."

youth enamoured of fame seeks too fondly, to prove that mind never works, however erratically, in vain—and to retain yet, as an influence upon earth, the soul about to soar far beyond the atmosphere where the elements that make fame abide. Not thus had the dying man interpreted the endurance of light and thought.

Suddenly, in the midst of his reverie, a loud cry broke on his ear. He shuddered as he heard, and hastened forebodingly into the adjoining room. The old woman was kneeling by the bedside, and chafing Burley's hand—eagerly looking into his face. A glance sufficed to Leonard. All was over. Burley had died in sleep—calmly, and without a groan.

The eyes were half-open, with that look of inexpressible softness which death sometimes leaves; and still they were turned towards the light; and the light burned clear. Leonard closed tenderly the heavy lids; and, as he covered the face, the lips smiled a serene farewell.

CHAPTER XIII.

We have seen Squire Hazeldean (proud of the contents of his pocket-book, and his knowledge of the mercenary nature of foreign women) set off on his visit to Beatrice di Negra. Randal thus left, musing lone in the crowded streets, revolved with astute complacency the probable results of Mr Hazeldean's bluff negotiation ; and, convincing himself that one of his vistas towards Fortune was becoming more clear and clear, he turned with the restless activity of some founder of destined cities in a new settlement, to lop the boughs that cumbered and obscured the others. For truly, like a man in a vast Columbian forest, opening entangled space, now with the ready axe, now with the patient train that kindles the slower fire, this child of civilised life went toiling on against surrounding obstacles, resolute to destroy, but ever scheming to construct. And now Randal has reached Levy's dainty business-room, and is buried deep in discussion how to secure to himself, at the expense of his patron, the representation of Lansmere, and how to complete the contract which shall reannex to his forlorn inheritance some fragments of its ancient wealth.

Meanwhile, Chance fought on his side in the boudoir of May Fair. The Squire had found the Marchesa at home,—briefly introduced himself and his business,—told her she was mistaken if she had fancied she had taken in a rich heir in his son,—that, thank Heaven, he could leave his estates to his ploughman, should he so please, but that he was willing to do things liberally; and whatever she thought Frank was worth, he was very ready to pay for.

At another time Beatrice would perhaps have laughed at this strange address; or she might, in some prouder moment, have fired up with all a patrician's resentment, and a woman's pride; but now her spirit was crushed, her nerves shattered; the sense of her degraded position, of her dependence on her brother, combined with her supreme unhappiness at the loss of those dreams with which Leonard had for a while charmed her wearied, waking life—all came upon her. She listened, pale and speechless; and the poor Squire thought he was quietly advancing towards a favourable result, when she suddenly burst into a passion of hysterical tears; and just at that moment Frank himself entered the room. At the sight of his father, of Beatrice's grief, his sense of filial duty gave way. He was maddened by irritation—by the insult offered to the woman he loved, which a few trembling words from her explained to him; maddened yet more by the fear that the insult had lost her to him—warm words ensued between son and father, to close with the peremptory command and vehement threat of the last.

"Come away this instant, sir! Come with me, or before the day is over I strike you out of my will!"

The son's answer was not to his father; he threw himself at Beatrice's feet.

"Forgive him—forgive us both——"

"What! you prefer that stranger to me—to the inheritance of Hazeldean!" cried the Squire, stamping his foot.

"Leave your estates to whom you will; all that I care for in life is here!"

The Squire stood still a moment or so, gazing on his son, with a strange bewildered marvel at the strength of that mystic passion, which none not labouring under its fearful charm can comprehend,—which creates the sudden idol that no reason justifies, and sacrifices to its fatal shrine alike the Past and the Future. Not trusting himself to speak, the father drew his hand across his eyes, and dashed away the bitter tear that sprang from a swelling indignant heart; then he uttered an inarticulate sound, and, finding his voice gone, moved away to the door, and left the house.

He walked through the streets, bearing his head very erect, as a proud man does when deeply wounded, and striving to shake off some affection that he deems a weakness; and his trembling, nervous fingers fumbled at the button of his coat, trying to tighten the garment across his chest, as if to confirm a resolution that still sought to struggle out of the revolting heart.

Thus he went on, and the reader, perhaps, will wonder whither, and the wonder may not lessen when he finds the Squire come to a dead pause in Grosvenor Square, and at the portico of his "distant brother's" stately house.

At the Squire's brief inquiry whether Mr Egerton was at home, the porter summoned the groom of the chambers; and the groom of the chambers, seeing a stranger, doubted whether his master was not engaged, but would take in the stranger's card, and see.

"Ay, ay," muttered the Squire, "this is true relationship!—my child prefers a stranger to me; why should I complain that I am a stranger in my brother's house? Sir," added the Squire, aloud, and very meekly—"sir, please to say to your master that I am William Hazeldean."

The servant bowed low, and without another word conducted the visitor into the statesman's library, and, announcing Mr Hazeldean, closed the door.

Audley was seated at his desk, the grim iron boxes still at his feet, but they were now closed and locked. And the ex-minister was no longer looking over official documents; letters spread open before him of far different nature; in his hand there lay a long lock of fair silken hair, on which his eyes were fixed sadly and intently. He started at the sound of his visitor's name, and the tread of the Squire's stalwart footstep; and mechanically thrust into his bosom the relic of younger and warmer years, keeping his hand to his heart, which beat loud with disease under the light pressure of that golden hair.

The two brothers stood on the great man's lonely hearth, facing each other in silence, and noting unconsciously the change made in each during the long years in which they had never met.

The Squire, with his portly size, his hardy sunburnt cheeks, the partial baldness of his unfurrowed, open forehead, looked his full age—deep into middle life. Unmistakably he seemed the *pater familias*,—the husband and the father,—the man of social domestic ties. But about Audley (really some few years junior to the Squire), despite the lines of care on his handsome face, there still lingered the grace of youth. Men of cities retain youth longer than those of the country,—a remark which Buffon has not failed to make and to account for. Neither did Egerton betray the air of the married man; for ineffable solitariness seemed stamped upon one whose private life had long been so stern a solitude. No ray from the focus of Home played round that reserved, unjoyous, melancholy brow. In a word, Audley looked still the man for whom some young female heart might fondly sigh; and not the less because of the cold eye and compressed lip, which challenged interest even while seeming to repel it.

Audley was the first to speak, and to put forth the right hand, which he stole slowly from its place at his breast, on which the lock of hair still stirred to and fro at the heave of the labouring heart. "William," said he, with his rich deep voice, "this is kind. You are come to see me, now that men say I am fallen. The minister you censured is no more; and you see again the brother."

The Squire was softened at once by this address. He shook heartily the hand tendered to him; and then, turning away his head, with an honest conviction that Audley ascribed to him a credit which he did not deserve, he said, "No, no, Audley; I am more selfish than you think me. I have come—I have come to ask your advice—no, not exactly that—your opinion. But you are busy?——"

"Sit down, William. Old days were coming over me when you entered; days earlier still return now—days, too, that leave no shadow when their suns are set."

The proud man seemed to think he had said too much. His practical nature rebuked the poetic sentiment and phrase. He recollected himself, and added more coldly, "You would ask my opinion? What on? Some public matter—some parliamentary bill that may affect your property?"

"Am I such a mean miser as that? Property—property? What does property matter, when a man is struck down at his own hearth? Property, indeed! But you have no child—happy brother!"

"Ay, ay; as you say, I am a happy man; childless! Has your son displeased you? I have heard him well spoken of, too."

"Don't talk of him. Whether his conduct be good or ill, is my affair," resumed the poor father with a testy voice—jealous alike of Audley's praise or blame of his rebellious son. Then he rose a moment, and made a strong gulp, as if for air; and laying his broad brown hand on his brother's shoulder, said—"Randal Leslie tells me you are wise—a consummate man of the world. No doubt you are so. And Parson Dale tells me that he is sure you have warm feelings—which I take to be a strange thing for one who has lived so long in London, and has no wife and no child—a widower, and a Member of Parliament—for a commercial city, too. Never smile; it is no smiling matter with me. You know a foreign woman, called Negra, or Negro—not a blackymoor, though, by any means—at least on the outside of her. Is she such a woman as a plain country gentleman would like his only son to marry—ay or no?"

"No, indeed," answered Audley, gravely; "and I trust your son will commit no action so rash. Shall I see him or her? Speak, my dear William. What would you have me do?"

"Nothing; you have said enough," replied the Squire, gloomily; and his head sank on his breast.

Audley took his hand, and pressed it fraternally. "William," said the statesman, "we have been long estranged; but I do not forget that when we last met, at—at Lord Lansmere's house, and when I took you aside, and said, 'William, if I lose this election, I must resign all chance of public life; my affairs are embarrassed. I would not accept money from you—I would seek a profession, and you can help me there,' you divined my meaning, and said—'Take orders; the Hazeldean living is just vacant. I will get some one to hold it till you are ordained.' I do not forget that. Would that I had thought earlier of so serene an escape from all that then tormented me. My lot might have been far happier."

The Squire eyed Audley with a surprise that broke forth from his more absorbing emotions. "Happier! Why, all things have prospered with you; and you are rich enough now; and—you shake your head. Brother, is it possible! do you want money? Pooh, not accept money from your mother's son!—stuff." Out came the Squire's pocket-book. Audley put it gently aside.

"Nay," said he, "I have enough for myself; but since you seek and speak with me thus affectionately, I will ask you one favour. Should I die before I can provide for my wife's kinsman, Randal Leslie, as I could wish, will you see to his fortunes, so far as you can, without injury to others—to your own son?"

"My son! He *is* provided for. He has the Casino estate—much good may it do him. You have touched on the very matter that brought me here. This boy, Randal Leslie, seems a praiseworthy lad, and has Hazeldean blood in his veins. You have taken him up because he is connected with your late wife. Why should not I take him up, too, when his grandmother was a Hazeldean? My main object in calling was to ask what you mean to do for him; for if you do not mean to provide for him, why, I will, as in duty bound. So your request comes at the right time; I think of altering my will. I can put him into the entail, besides a handsome legacy. You are sure he is a good lad —and it will please you too, Audley!"

"But not at the expense of your son. And stay, William—as to this foolish marriage with Madame di Negra,—who told you Frank meant to take such a step?"

"He told me himself; but it is no matter. Randal and I both did all we could to dissuade him; and Randal advised me to come to you."

"He has acted generously, then, our kinsman Randal —I am glad to hear it," said Audley, his brow somewhat clearing. "I have no influence with this lady; but, at least, I can counsel her. Do not consider the marriage fixed because a young man desires it. Youth is ever hot and rash."

"Your youth never was," retorted the Squire, bluntly. "You married well enough, I'm sure. I will say one thing for you: you have been, to my taste, a bad politician—beg pardon—but you were always a gentleman. You would never have disgraced your family and married a——"

"Hush!" interrupted Egerton, gently. "Do not make matters worse than they are. Madame di Negra is of high birth in her own country; and if scandal——"

"Scandal!" cried the Squire, shrinking and turning pale. "Are you speaking of the wife of a Hazeldean? At least she shall never sit by the hearth at which now sits his mother; and whatever I may do for Frank, her children shall not succeed. No mongrel crossbreed shall kennel in English Hazeldean. Much obliged to you, Audley, for your good feeling—glad to have seen you; and harkye, you startled me by that shake of your head, when I spoke of your wealth; and, from what you say about Randal's prospects, I guess that you London gentlemen are not so thrifty as we are. You *shall* let me speak. I say again, that I have some thousands quite at your service. And though you are not a Hazeldean, still you are my mother's son; and now that I am about to alter my will, I can as well scratch in the name of Egerton as that of Leslie. Cheer up, cheer up: you are younger than I am, and you have no child; so you will live longer than I shall."

"My dear brother," answered Audley, "believe me, I shall never live to want your aid. And as to Leslie, add to the £5000 I mean to give him, an equal sum in your will, and I shall feel that he has received justice."

Observing that the Squire, though he listened attentively, made no ready answer, Audley turned the subject again to Frank; and with the adroitness of a man of the world, backed by a cordial sympathy in his brother's distress, he pleaded so well Frank's lame cause, urged so gently the wisdom of patience and delay, and the appeal to filial feeling rather than recourse to paternal threats, that the Squire grew mollified in spite of himself, and left his brother's house a much less angry and less doleful man.

Mr Hazeldean was still in the square, when he came upon Randal himself, who was walking with a dark-whiskered, showy gentleman, towards Egerton's house. Randal and the gentleman exchanged a hasty whisper, and the former then exclaimed—

"What, Mr Hazeldean, have you just left your brother's house? Is it possible?"

"Why, you advised me to go there, and I did. I scarcely knew what I was about. I am very glad I did go. Hang politics! hang the landed interest! what do I care for either now?"

"Foiled with Madame di Negra?" asked Randal, drawing the Squire aside.

"Never speak of her again!" cried the Squire, fiercely. "And as to that ungrateful boy—but I don't mean to behave harshly to him—he shall have money enough to keep her if he likes—keep her from coming to me—keep him, too, from counting on my death, and borrowing post-obits on the Casino—for he'll be doing that next—no, I hope I wrong him there; I have been too good a father for him to count on my death already. After all," continued the Squire, beginning to relax, "as Audley says, the marriage is not yet made; and if the woman has taken him in, he is young, and his heart is warm. Make yourself easy, my boy. I don't forget how kindly you took his part; and before I do anything rash, I'll at least consult with his poor mother."

Randal gnawed his pale lip, and a momentary cloud of disappointment passed over his face.

"True, sir," said he, gently; "true, you must not be rash. Indeed, I was thinking of you and poor dear Frank at the very moment I met you. It occurred to me whether we might not make Frank's very embarrassments a reason to induce Madame di Negra to refuse him; and I was on my way to Mr Egerton, in order to ask his opinion, in company with the gentleman yonder."

"Gentleman yonder! Why should he thrust his long nose into my family affairs? Who the devil is he?"

"Don't ask, sir. Pray let me act."

But the Squire continued to eye askant the dark-whiskered personage thus interposed between himself and his son, and who waited patiently a few yards in the rear, carelessly readjusting the camelia in his button-hole.

"He looks very outlandish. Is he a foreigner too?" asked the Squire at last.

"No, not exactly. However, he knows all about Frank's embarrassments; and——"

"Embarrassments! what, the debt he paid for that woman? How did he raise the money?"

"I don't know," answered Randal, "and that is the reason I asked Baron Levy to accompany me to Egerton's, that he might explain in private what I have no reason——"

"Baron Levy!" interrupted the Squire. "Levy, Levy—I have heard of a Levy who has nearly ruined my neighbour Thornhill—a money-lender. Zounds! is that the man who knows my son's affairs? I'll soon learn, sir."

Randal caught hold of the Squire's arm: "Stop, stop; if you really insist upon learning more about Frank's debts, you must not appeal to Baron Levy directly, and as Frank's father: he will not answer you. But if I present you to him as a mere acquaintance of mine, and turn the conversation, as if carelessly, upon Frank—why, since, in the London world, such matters are never kept secret, except from the parents of young men—I have no doubt he will talk out openly."

"Manage it as you will," said the Squire.

Randal took Mr Hazeldean's arm, and joined Levy —"A friend of mine from the country, Baron." Levy bowed profoundly, and the three walked slowly on.

"By the by," said Randal, pressing significantly upon Levy's arm, "my friend has come to town upon the somewhat unpleasant business of settling the debts of another—a young man of fashion—a relation of his own. No one, sir," turning to the Squire, "could so ably assist you in such arrangements as could Baron Levy."

BARON (modestly, and with a moralising air).—"I have some experience in such matters, and I hold it a duty to assist the parents and relations of young men who, from want of reflection, often ruin themselves for life. I hope the young gentleman in question is not in the hands of the Jews?"

RANDAL.—"Christians are as fond of good interest for their money as ever the Jews can be."

Baron.—"Granted, but they have not always so much money to lend. The first thing, sir," addressing the Squire—"the first thing for you to do is to buy up such of your relation's bills and notes of hand as may be in the market. No doubt we can get them a bargain, unless the young man is heir to some property that may soon be his in the course of nature."

Randal.—"Not soon—Heaven forbid! His father is still a young man—a fine healthy man" (leaning heavily on Levy's arm); "and as to post-obits——"

Baron.—"Post-obits on sound security cost more to buy up, however healthy the obstructing relative may be."

Randal.—"I should hope that there are not many sons who can calculate, in cold blood, on the death of their fathers."

Baron.—"Ha, ha—he is young, our friend Randal; eh, sir?"

Randal.—"Well, I am not more scrupulous than others, I dare say; and I have often been pinched hard for money, but I would go barefoot rather than give security upon a father's grave! I can imagine nothing more likely to destroy natural feeling, nor to instil ingratitude and treachery into the whole character, than to press the hand of a parent, and calculate when that hand may be dust—than to sit down with strangers and reduce his life to the measure of an insurance-table—than to feel difficulties gathering round one, and mutter in fashionable slang, 'But it will be all well if the governor would but die.' And he who has accustomed himself to the relief of post-obits must gradually harden his mind to all this."

The Squire groaned heavily; and had Randal proceeded another sentence in the same strain, the Squire would have wept outright. "But," continued Randal, altering the tone of his voice, "I think that our young friend, of whom we were talking just now, Levy, before this gentleman joined us, has the same opinions as myself on this head. He may accept bills, but he would never sign post-obits."

BARON (who with the apt docility of a managed charger to the touch of a rider's hand, had comprehended and complied with each quick sign of Randal's). —"Pooh! the young fellow we are talking of? Nonsense. He would not be so foolish as to give five times the per-centage he otherwise might. Not sign post-obits! Of course he has signed one."

RANDAL.—"Hist—you mistake, you mistake."

SQUIRE (leaving Randal's arm and seizing Levy's).— "Were you speaking of Frank Hazeldean?"

BARON.—"My dear sir, excuse me; I never mention names before strangers."

SQUIRE.—"Strangers again! Man, I am the boy's father! Speak out, sir;" and his hand closed on Levy's arm with the strength of an iron vice.

BARON.—"Gently; you hurt me, sir: but I excuse your feelings. Randal, you are to blame for leading me into this indiscretion; but I beg to assure Mr Hazeldean, that though his son has been a little extravagant——"

RANDAL.—"Owing chiefly to the arts of an abandoned woman."

BARON.—"Of an abandoned woman; still he has shown more prudence than you would suppose; and this very post-obit is a proof of it. A simple act of that kind has enabled him to pay off bills that were running on till they would have ruined even the Hazeldean estate; whereas a charge on the reversion of the Casino——"

SQUIRE.—"He has done it then? He has signed a post-obit?"

RANDAL.—"No, no, Levy must be wrong."

BARON.—"My dear Leslie, a man of Mr Hazeldean's time of life cannot have your romantic boyish notions. He must allow that Frank has acted in this like a lad of sense—very good head for business has my young friend Frank! And the best thing Mr Hazeldean can do is quietly to buy up the post-obit, and thus he will place his son henceforth in his power."

SQUIRE.—"Can I see the deed with my own eyes?"

BARON.—"Certainly, or how could you be induced to buy it up? But on one condition: you must not betray me to your son. And, indeed, take my advice, and don't say a word to him on the matter."

SQUIRE.—"Let me see it, let me see it with my own eyes. His mother else will never believe it—nor will I."

BARON.—"I can call on you this evening."

SQUIRE.—"Now, now."

Baron.—"You can spare me, Randal; and you yourself can open to Mr Egerton the other affair respecting Lansmere. No time should be lost, lest L'Estrange suggest a candidate."

Randal (whispering).—"Never mind me. This is more important." (Aloud)—"Go with Mr Hazeldean. My dear kind friend" (to the Squire), "do not let this vex you so much. After all, it is what nine young men out of ten would do in the same circumstances. And it is best you should know it; you may save Frank from farther ruin, and prevent, perhaps, this very marriage."

"We will see," exclaimed the Squire, hastily. "Now, Mr Levy, come."

Levy and the Squire walked on, not arm in arm, but side by side. Randal proceeded to Egerton's house.

"I am glad to see you, Leslie," said the ex-minister. "What is it I have heard? My nephew, Frank Hazeldean, proposes to marry Madame di Negra against his father's consent? How could you suffer him to entertain an idea so wild? And how never confide it to me?"

Randal. — "My dear Mr Egerton, it is only to-day that I was informed of Frank's engagement. I have already seen him, and expostulated in vain; till then, though I knew your nephew admired Madame di Negra, I could never suppose he harboured a serious intention."

Egerton. — "I must believe you, Randal. I will myself see Madame di Negra, though I have no power, and no right, to dictate to her. I have but little time for all such private business; the dissolution of Parliament is so close at hand."

Randal (looking down).—"It is on that subject that I wished to speak to you, sir. You think of standing for Lansmere. Well, Baron Levy has suggested to me an idea that I could not, of course, even countenance, till I had spoken to you. It seems that he has some acquaintance with the state of parties in that borough! He is informed that it is not only as easy to bring in two of our side, as to carry one, but that it would make your election still more safe, not to fight single-handed against two opponents; that if canvassing for yourself alone, you could not carry a sufficient number of plumper votes; that split votes would go from you to one or other of the two adversaries; that, in a word, it is necessary to pair you with a colleague. If it really be so, you of course will learn best from your own committee; but should they concur in the opinion Baron Levy has formed—do I presume too much on your kindness—to deem it possible that you might allow me to be the second candidate on your side? I should not say this, but that Levy told me you had some wish to see me in Parliament, amongst the supporters of your policy. And what other opportunity can occur? Here the cost of carrying two would be scarcely more than that of carrying one. And Levy says, the party would subscribe for my election; you, of course, would refuse all such aid for your own; and indeed, with your great name, and Lord Lansmere's interest, there can be little beyond the strict legal expenses."

As Randal spoke thus at length, he watched anxiously his patron's reserved, unrevealing countenance.

Egerton (drily).—"I will consider. You may safely leave in my hands any matter connected with your ambition and advancement. I have before told you I hold it a duty to do all in my power for the kinsman of my late wife—for one whose career I undertook to forward—for one whom honour has compelled to share in my own political reverses."

Here Egerton rang the bell for his hat and gloves, and walking into the hall, paused at the street-door. There beckoning to Randal, he said slowly, "You seem intimate with Baron Levy; I caution you against him—a dangerous acquaintance, first to the purse, next to the honour."

Randal.—"I know it, sir; and am surprised myself at the acquaintance that has grown up between us. Perhaps its cause is in his respect for yourself."

Egerton.—"Tut."

Randal.—"Whatever it be, he contrives to obtain a singular hold over one's mind, even where, as in my case, he has no evident interest to serve. How is this? It puzzles me!"

Egerton.—"For his interest, it is most secured where he suffers it to be least evident; for his hold over the mind, it is easily accounted for. He ever appeals to two temptations, strong with all men—Avarice and Ambition. Good-day."

RANDAL.—"Are you going to Madame di Negra's? Shall I not accompany you? Perhaps I may be able to back your own remonstrances."

EGERTON.—"No, I shall not require you."

RANDAL.—"I trust I shall hear the result of your interview? I feel so much interested in it. Poor Frank!"

Audley nodded. "Of course, of course."

CHAPTER XIV.

On entering the drawing-room of Madame di Negra, the peculiar charm which the severe Audley Egerton had been ever reputed to possess with women, would have sensibly struck one who had hitherto seen him chiefly in his relations with men in the business-like affairs of life. It was a charm in strong contrast to the ordinary manners of those who are emphatically called "Ladies' men." No artificial smile, no conventional hollow blandness, no frivolous gossip, no varnish either of ungenial gaiety or affected grace. The charm was in a simplicity that unbent more into kindness than it did with men. Audley's nature, whatever its faults and defects, was essentially masculine ; and it was the sense of masculine power that gave to his voice a music when addressing the gentler sex, and to his manner a sort of indulgent tenderness that appeared equally void of insincerity and presumption.

Frank had been gone about half an hour, and Madame di Negra was scarcely recovered from the agitation into which she had been thrown by the affront from the father and the pleading of the son.

Egerton took her passive hand cordially, and seated himself by her side.

"My dear Marchesa," said he, "are we then likely to be near connections? And can you seriously contemplate marriage with my young nephew, Frank Hazeldean? You turn away. Ay, my fair friend, there are but two inducements to a free woman to sign away her liberty at the altar. I say a free woman, for widows are free, and girls are not. These inducements are, first, worldly position; secondly, love. Which of these motives can urge Madame di Negra to marry Mr Frank Hazeldean?"

"There are other motives than those you speak of—the need of protection—the sense of solitude—the curse of dependence—gratitude for honourable affection. But you men never know women!"

"I grant that you are right there—we never do; neither do women ever know men. And yet each sex contrives to dupe and to fool the other! Listen to me. I have little acquaintance with my nephew, but I allow he is a handsome young gentleman, with whom a handsome young lady in her teens might fall in love in a ball-room. But you who have known the higher order of our species—you who have received the homage of men, whose thoughts and mind leave the small talk of drawing-room triflers so poor and bald—you cannot look me in the face and say that it is any passion resembling love which you feel for my nephew. And as to position, it is right that I should inform you that if he marry you he will have none. He may risk his inheritance. You will receive no countenance from his parents. You will be poor, but not free. You will not gain the independence you seek for. The sight of a vacant discontented face in that opposite chair will be worse than solitude. And as to grateful affection," added the man of the world, "it is a polite synonym for tranquil indifference."

"Mr Egerton," said Beatrice, "people say you are made of bronze. Did you ever feel the want of a home?"

"I answer you frankly," replied the statesman, "if I had not felt it, do you think I should have been, and that I should be to the last, the joyless drudge of public life? Bronze though you may call my nature, it would have melted away long since, like wax in the fire, if I had sat idly down and dreamed of a *home!*"

"But we women," answered Beatrice, with pathos, "have no public life, and we do idly sit down and dream. Oh," she continued, after a short pause, and clasping her hands firmly together, "you think me worldly, grasping, ambitious; how different my fate had been, had I known a home!—known one whom I could love and venerate—known one whose smiles would have developed the good that was once within me, and the fear of whose rebuking or sorrowful eye would have corrected what is evil."

"Yet," answered Audley, "nearly all women in the great world have had that choice once in their lives, and nearly all have thrown it away. How few of your rank really think of home when they marry—how few ask to venerate as well as to love—and how many, of every rank, when the home has been really gained, have wilfully lost its shelter; some in neglectful weariness—some from a momentary doubt, distrust, caprice—a wild fancy—a passionate fit—a trifle—a straw—a dream! True, you women are ever dreamers. Common sense, common earth, is above or below your comprehension."

Both now are silent. Audley first roused himself with a quick writhing movement. "We two," said he, smiling half sadly, half cynically—"we two must not longer waste time in talking sentiment. We know both too well what life, as it has been made for us by our faults or our misfortunes, truly is. And once again, I entreat you to pause before you yield to the foolish suit of my foolish nephew. Rely on it, you will either command a higher offer for your prudence to accept; or, if you needs must sacrifice rank and fortune, you, with your beauty and your romantic heart, will see one who, at least for a fair holiday season (if human love allows no more), can repay you for the sacrifice. Frank Hazeldean never can."

Beatrice turned away to conceal the tears that rushed to her eyes.

"Think over this well," said Audley, in the softest tones of his mellow voice. "Do you remember that when you first came to England, I told you that neither wedlock nor love had any lures for me. We grew friends upon that rude avowal, and therefore I now speak to you like some sage of old, wise because standing apart and aloof from all the affections and ties that mislead our wisdom. Nothing but real love (how rare it is ! has one human heart in a million ever known it ?) —nothing but real love can repay us for the loss of freedom—the cares and fears of poverty—the cold pity of the world that we both despise and respect. And all these, and much more, follow the step you would inconsiderately take—an imprudent marriage."

"Audley Egerton," said Beatrice, lifting her dark, moistened eyes, "you grant that real love does compensate for an imprudent marriage. You speak as if you had known such love—you ! Can it be possible ?"

"Real love—I thought that I knew it once. Looking back with remorse, I should doubt it now but for one curse, that only real love, when lost, has the power to leave evermore behind it."

"What is that ?"

"A void here," answered Egerton, striking his heart. "Desolation !—Adieu !"

He rose and left the room.

"Is it," murmured Egerton, as he pursued his way through the streets—"is it that, as we approach death, all the first fair feelings of young life come back to us mysteriously ? Thus I have heard, or read, that in some country of old, children scattering flowers preceded a funeral bier."

CHAPTER XV.

And so Leonard stood beside his friend's mortal clay, and watched, in the ineffable smile of death, the last gleam which the soul had left there ; and so, after a time, he crept back to the adjoining room with a step as noiseless as if he had feared to disturb the dead. Wearied as he was with watching, he had no thought of sleep. He sat himself down by the little table, and leaned his face on his hand, musing sorrowfully. Thus time passed. He heard the clock from below strike the hours. In the house of death the sound of a clock becomes so solemn. The soul that we miss has gone so far beyond the reach of time ! A cold superstitious awe gradually stole over the young man. He shivered, and lifted his eyes with a start, half-scornful, half-defying. The moon was gone—the grey comfortless dawn gleamed through the casement, and carried its raw chilling light through the open doorway into the death-room. And there, near the extinguished fire, Leonard saw the solitary woman, weeping low, and watching still. He returned to say a word of comfort—she pressed his hand, but waved him away. He understood. She did not wish for other comfort than her quiet relief of tears. Again he returned to his own chamber, and his eye this time fell upon the papers which he had hitherto disregarded. What made his heart stand still, and the blood then rush so quickly through his veins? Why did he seize upon those papers with so tremulous a hand—then lay them down—pause, as if to nerve himself—and look so eagerly again? He recognised the handwriting—those fair, clear characters—so peculiar in their woman-like delicacy and grace—the same as in the wild, pathetic poems, the sight of which had made an era in his boyhood. From these pages the image of the mysterious Nora rose once more before him. He felt that he was with a mother. He went back, and closed the door gently, as if with a jealous piety, to exclude each ruder shadow from the world of spirits, and be alone with that mournful ghost. For a thought written in warm, sunny life, and then suddenly rising up to us, when the hand that traced, and the heart that cherished it, are dust—is verily as a ghost. It is a likeness struck off of the fond human being, and surviving it. Far more truthful than bust or portrait, it bids us see the tear flow, and the pulse beat. What ghost can the churchyard yield to us like the writing of the dead?

The bulk of the papers had been once lightly sewn to each other—they had come undone, perhaps in Burley's rude hands; but their order was easily apparent. Leonard soon saw that they formed a kind of journal—not, indeed, a regular diary, nor always relating to the things of the day. There were gaps in time

—no attempt at successive narrative. Sometimes, instead of prose, a hasty burst of verse, gushing evidently from the heart—sometimes all narrative was left untold, and yet, as it were, epitomised by a single burning line—a single exclamation—of woe or joy! Everywhere you saw records of a nature exquisitely susceptible; and, where genius appeared, it was so artless, that you did not call it genius, but emotion. At the onset the writer did not speak of herself in the first person. The MS. opened with descriptions and short dialogues, carried on by persons to whose names only initial letters were assigned, all written in a style of simple innocent freshness, and breathing of purity and happiness, like a dawn of spring. Two young persons, humbly born—a youth and a girl—the last still in childhood, each chiefly self-taught, are wandering on Sabbath evenings among green dewy fields, near the busy town, in which labour awhile is still. Few words pass between them. You see at once, though the writer does not mean to convey it, how far beyond the scope of her male companion flies the heavenward imagination of the girl. It is he who questions—it is she who answers; and soon there steals upon you, as you read, the conviction that the youth loves the girl, and loves in vain. All in this writing, though terse, is so truthful! Leonard, in the youth, already recognises the rude imperfect scholar—the village bard—Mark Fairfield. Then, there is a gap in description—but there are short weighty sentences, which show deepening thought, increasing years, in the writer. And though the innocence remains, the happiness begins to be less vivid on the page.

Now, insensibly, Leonard finds that there is a new phase in the writer's existence. Scenes, no longer of humble work-day rural life, surround her; and a fairer and more dazzling image succeeds to the companion of the Sabbath eves. This image Nora evidently loves to paint—it is akin to her own genius—it captivates her fancy—it is an image that she (inborn artist, and conscious of her art) feels to belong to a brighter and higher school of the Beautiful. And yet the virgin's heart is not awakened—no trace of the heart yet there! The new image thus introduced is one of her own years, perhaps; nay, it may be younger still, for it is a boy that is described, with his profuse fair curls, and eyes new to grief, and confronting the sun as a young eagle's; with veins so full of the wine of life, that they overflow into every joyous whim; with nerves quiveringly alive to the desire of glory; with the frank generous nature, rash in its laughing scorn of the world, which it has not tried. Who was this boy, it perplexed Leonard: he feared to guess. Soon, less told than implied, you saw that this companionship, however it chanced, brings fear and pain on the writer. Again, as before, with Mark Fairfield, there is love on the one side and not on the other;—with her there is affectionate, almost sisterly, interest, admiration, gratitude—but a something of pride or of terror that keeps back love.

Here Leonard's interest grew intense. Were there touches by which conjecture grew certainty; and he recognised, through the lapse of years, the boy-lover in his own generous benefactor?

Fragments of dialogue now began to reveal the suit of an ardent impassioned nature, and the simple wonder and strange alarm of a listener who pitied but could not sympathise. Some great worldly distinction of rank between the two became visible—that distinction seemed to arm the virtue and steel the affections of the lowlier born. Then a few sentences, half-blotted out with tears, told of wounded and humbled feelings—some one invested with authority, as if the suitor's parent, had interfered, questioned, reproached, counselled. And it was evident that the suit was not one that dishonoured;—it wooed to flight, but still to marriage.

And now these sentences grew briefer still, as with the decision of a strong resolve. And to these there followed a passage so exquisite, that Leonard wept unconsciously as he read. It was the description of a visit spent at home previous to some sorrowful departure. He caught the glimpse of a proud and vain, but a tender wistful mother—of a father's fonder but less thoughtful love. And then came a quiet soothing scene between the girl and her first village lover, ending thus—"So she put M.'s hand into her sister's, and said: 'You loved me through the fancy, love her with the heart,' and left them comprehending each other, and betrothed."

Leonard sighed. He understood now how Mark

Fairfield saw, in the homely features of his unlettered wife, the reflection of the sister's soul and face.

A few words told the final parting—words that were a picture. The long friendless highway, stretching on—on—towards the remorseless city. And the doors of home opening on the desolate thoroughfare—and the old pollard tree beside the threshold, with the ravens wheeling round it and calling to their young. He too had watched that threshold from the same desolate thoroughfare. He too had heard the cry of the ravens. Then came some pages covered with snatches of melancholy verse, or some reflections of dreamy gloom.

The writer was in London, in the house of some high-born patroness—that friendless shadow of a friend which the jargon of society calls "companion." And she was looking on the bright storm of the world as through prison bars. Poor bird, afar from the greenwood, she had need of song—it was her last link with freedom and nature. The patroness seems to share in her apprehensions of the boy suitor, whose wild rash prayers the fugitive had resisted; but to fear least the suitor should be degraded, not the one whom he pursues—fear an alliance ill-suited to a high-born heir. And this kind of fear stings the writer's pride, and she grows harsh in her judgment of him who thus causes but pain where he proffers love. Then there is a reference to some applicant for her hand, who is pressed upon her choice. And she is told that it is her duty so to choose, and thus deliver a noble family from a dread that endures so long as her hand is free. And of this fear, and of this applicant, there breaks out a petulant yet pathetic scorn. After this the narrative, to judge by the dates, pauses for days and weeks, as if the writer had grown weary and listless,—suddenly to re-open in a new strain, eloquent with hopes and with fears never known before. The first person was abruptly assumed—it was the living "I" that now breathed and moved along the lines. How was this? The woman was no more a shadow and a secret unknown to herself: she had assumed the intense and vivid sense of individual being; and love spoke loud in the awakened human heart.

A personage not seen till then appeared on the page. And ever afterwards this personage was only named as "*He*," as if the one and sole representative of all the myriads that walk the earth. The first notice of this prominent character on the scene showed the restless agitated effect produced on the writer's imagination. He was invested with a romance probably not his own. He was described in contrast to the brilliant boy whose suit she had feared, pitied, and now sought to shun—described with a grave and serious, but gentle mien—a voice that imposed respect—an eye and lip that showed collected dignity of will. Alas! the writer betrayed herself, and the charm was in the contrast, not to the character of the earlier lover, but her own. And now, leaving Leonard to explore and guess his way through the gaps and chasms of the narrative, it is time to place before the reader what the narrative alone will not reveal to Leonard.

CHAPTER XVI.

Nora Avenel had fled from the boyish love of Harley L'Estrange—recommended by Lady Lansmere to a valetudinarian relative of her own, Lady Jane Horton, as companion. But Lady Lansmere could not believe it possible that the low-born girl could long sustain her generous pride, and reject the ardent suit of one who could offer to her the prospective coronet of a countess. She continually urged upon Lady Jane the necessity of marrying Nora to some one of rank less disproportioned to her own, and empowered that lady to assure any such wooer of a dowry far beyond Nora's station. Lady Jane looked around, and saw, in the outskirts of her limited social ring, a young solicitor, a peer's natural son, who was on terms of more than business-like intimacy with the fashionable clients whose distresses made the origin of his wealth. The young man was handsome, well-dressed, and bland. Lady Jane invited him to her house; and, seeing him struck with the rare loveliness of Nora, whispered the hint of the dower. The fashionable solicitor, who afterwards ripened into Baron Levy, did not need that hint; for, though then poor, he relied on himself for fortune, and, unlike Randal, he had warm blood in his veins. But Lady Jane's suggestions made him sanguine of success; and when he formally proposed, and was as formally refused, his self-love was bitterly wounded. Vanity in Levy was a powerful passion; and with the vain, hatred is strong, revenge is rankling. Levy retired, concealing his rage; nor did he himself know how vindictive that rage, when it cooled into malignancy, could become, until the arch-fiend OPPORTUNITY prompted its indulgence and suggested its design.

Lady Jane was at first very angry with Nora for the rejection of a suitor whom she had presented as eligible. But the pathetic grace of this wonderful girl had crept into her heart, and softened it even against family prejudice; and she gradually owned to herself that Nora was worthy of some one better than Mr Levy.

Now, Harley had ever believed that Nora returned his love, and that nothing but her own sense of gratitude to his parents — her own instincts of delicacy, made her deaf to his prayers. To do him justice, wild and headstrong as he then was, his suit would have ceased at once, had he really deemed it persecution. Nor was his error unnatural; for his conversation, till it had revealed his own heart, could not fail to have dazzled and delighted the child of genius; and her frank eyes would have shown the delight. How, at his age, could he see the distinction between the Poetess and the Woman? The poetess was charmed with rare promise in a soul of which the very errors were the extravagances of richness and beauty. But the woman—no ! the woman required some nature not yet undeveloped, and all at turbulent, if brilliant strife, with its own noble elements—but a nature formed and full-grown. Harley was a boy, and Nora was one of those women who must find or fancy an Ideal that commands and almost awes them into love.

Harley discovered, not without difficulty, Nora's new residence. He presented himself at Lady Jane's, and she, with grave rebuke, forbade him the house. He found it impossible to obtain an interview with Nora. He wrote, but he felt sure that his letters never reached her, since they were unanswered. His young heart swelled with rage. He dropped threats, which alarmed all the fears of Lady Lansmere, and even the prudent apprehensions of his friend, Audley Egerton. At the request of the mother, and equally at the wish of the son, Audley consented to visit at Lady Jane's and make acquaintance with Nora.

"I have such confidence in you," said Lady Lansmere, "that if you once know the girl, your advice will be sure to have weight with her.—You will show her how wicked it would be to let Harley break our hearts and degrade his station."

"I have such confidence in you," said young Harley, "that if you once know my Nora, you will no longer side with my mother. You will recognise the nobility which nature only can create—you will own that Nora is worthy a rank more lofty than mine; and my mother so believes in your wisdom, that, if you plead in my cause, you will convince even her."

Audley listened to both with his intelligent, half-incredulous smile; and wholly of the same opinion as Lady Lansmere, and sincerely anxious to save Harley from an indiscretion that his own notions led him to regard as fatal, he resolved to examine this boasted pearl, and to find out its flaws. Audley Egerton was then in the prime of his earnest, resolute, ambitious youth. The stateliness of his natural manners had then a suavity and polish which, even in later and busier life, it never wholly lost; since, in spite of the briefer words and the colder looks by which care and power mark the official man, the Minister had ever enjoyed that personal popularity which the indefinable, external *something,* that wins and pleases, can alone confer. But he had even then, as ever, that felicitous reserve which Rochefoucault has called the "mystery of the body"—that thin yet guardian veil which reveals but the strong outlines of character, and excites so much of interest by provoking so much of conjecture. To the man who is born with this reserve, which is wholly distinct from shyness, the world gives credit for qualities and talents beyond those that it perceives; and such characters are attractive to others in proportion as these last are gifted with the imagination which loves to divine the unknown.

At the first interview, the impression which this man produced upon Nora Avenel was profound and strange. She had heard of him before as the one whom Harley most loved and looked up to; and she recognised at once, in his mien, his aspect, his words, the very tone of his deep tranquil voice, the power to which woman, whatever her intellect, never attains; and to which, therefore, she imputes a nobility not always genuine—viz. the power of deliberate purpose, and self-collected, serene ambition. The effect that Nora produced on Egerton was not less sudden. He was startled by a beauty of face and form that belonged to that rarest order which we never behold but once or twice in our lives. He was yet more amazed to discover that the aristocracy of mind could bestow a grace that no aristocracy of birth could surpass. He was prepared for a simple, blushing village girl, and involuntarily he bowed low his proud front at the first sight of that delicate bloom, and that exquisite gentleness which is woman's surest passport to the respect of man. Neither in the first, nor the second, nor the third interview, nor, indeed, till after many interviews, could he summon up courage to commence his mission, and allude to Harley. And when he did so at last, his words faltered. But Nora's words were clear to him. He saw that Harley was not loved; and a joy, which he felt as guilty, darted through his whole frame. From that interview Audley returned home, greatly agitated, and at war with himself. Often, in the course of this story, has it been hinted that, under all Egerton's external coldness and measured self-control, lay a nature capable of strong and stubborn passions. Those passions broke forth then. He felt that love had already entered into the heart, which the trust of his friend should have sufficed to guard.

"I will go there no more," said he, abruptly to Harley.

"But why?"

"The girl does not love you. Cease, then, to think of her."

Harley disbelieved him, and grew indignant. But Audley had every worldly motive to assist his sense of honour. He was poor, though with the reputation of wealth—deeply involved in debt—resolved to rise in life—tenacious of his position in the world's esteem. Against a host of counteracting influences, love fought single-handed. Audley's was a strong nature; but, alas! in strong natures, if resistance to temptation is of granite, so the passions that they admit are of fire.

Trite is the remark, that the destinies of our lives often date from the impulses of unguarded moments. It was so with this man, to an ordinary eye so cautious and so deliberate. Harley one day came to him in great grief; he had heard that Nora was ill: he implored Audley to go once more and ascertain. Audley went. Lady Jane Horton, who was suffering under a disease which not long afterwards proved fatal, was too ill to receive him. He was shown into the room set apart as Nora's. While waiting for her entrance, he turned mechanically over the leaves of an album which Nora, suddenly summoned away to attend Lady Jane, had left behind her on the table. He saw the sketch of his own features: he read words inscribed below it—words of such artless tenderness, and such unhoping sorrow—words written by one who had been accustomed to regard her genius as her sole confidant, under Heaven; to pour out to it, as the solitary poet-heart is impelled to do, thoughts, feelings, the confession of mystic sighs, which it would never breathe to a living ear, and, save at such moments, scarcely acknowledge to itself. Audley saw that he was beloved, and the revelation, with a sudden light, consumed all the barriers between himself and his own love. And at that moment Nora entered. She saw him bending over the book. She uttered a cry—sprang forward—and then sank down, covering her face with her hands. But Audley was at her feet. He forgot his friend—his trust; he forgot ambition—he forgot the world. It was his own cause that he pleaded—his own love that burst forth from his lips. And when the two that day parted, they were betrothed each to each. Alas for them, and alas for Harley!

And now this man, who had hitherto valued himself as the very type of gentleman—whom all his young contemporaries had so regarded and so revered—had to press the hand of a confiding friend, and bid adieu to truth. He had to amuse, to delay, to mislead his boy-rival—to say that he was already subduing Nora's hesitating doubts—and that with a little time, she could be induced to consent to forget Harley's rank, and his parents' pride, and become his wife. And Harley believed in Egerton, without one suspicion on the mirror of his loyal soul.

Meanwhile, Audley, impatient of his own position—impatient, as strong minds ever are, to hasten what they have once resolved—to terminate a suspense that every interview with Harley tortured alike by jealousy and shame—to pass out of the reach of scruples, and to say to himself, "Right or wrong, there is no looking back; the deed is done;"—Audley, thus hurried on by the impetus of his own power of will, pressed for speedy and secret nuptials—secret, till his fortunes, then wavering, were more assured—his career fairly commenced. This was not his strongest motive, though it was one. He shrank from the discovery of his wrong to his friend—desired to delay the self-humiliation of such announcement, until, as he persuaded himself, Harley's boyish passion was over—had yielded to the new allurements that would naturally beset his way. Stifling his conscience, Audley sought to convince himself that the day would soon come when Harley could hear with indifference that Nora Avenel was another's. "The dream of an hour, at his age," murmured the elder friend; "but at mine, the passion of a life!" He did not speak of these latter motives for concealment to Nora. He felt that, to own the extent of his treason to a friend, would lower him in her eyes. He spoke therefore but slightingly of Harley—treated the boy's suit as a thing past and gone. He dwelt only on reasons that compelled self-sacrifice on his side or hers. She did not hesitate which to choose. And so, where Nora loved, so submissively did she believe in the superiority of the lover, that she would not pause to hear a murmur from her own loftier nature, or question the propriety of what he deemed wise and good.

Abandoning prudence in this arch affair of life, Audley still preserved his customary caution in minor details. And this indeed was characteristic of him throughout all his career—heedless in large things—wary in small. He would not trust Lady Jane Horton with his secret, still less Lady Lansmere. He simply represented to the former that Nora was no longer safe from Harley's determined pursuit under Lady Jane's roof, and that she had better elude the boy's knowledge of her movements, and go quietly away for a while, to lodge with some connection of her own.

And so, with Lady Jane's acquiescence, Nora went first to the house of a very distant kinswoman of her mother's, and afterwards to one that Egerton took as their bridal home, under the name of Bertram. He arranged all that might render their marriage most free from the chance of premature discovery. But it so happened on the very morning of their bridal, that one of the witnesses he selected (a confidential servant of his own) was seized with apoplexy. Considering, in haste, where to find a substitute, Egerton thought of Levy, his own private solicitor, his own fashionable money-lender, a man with whom he was then as intimate as a fine gentleman is with the lawyer of his own age, who knows all his affairs, and has helped, from pure friendship, to make them as bad as they are! Levy was thus suddenly summoned. Egerton, who was in great haste, did not at first communicate to him the name of the intended bride; but he said enough of the imprudence of the marriage, and his reasons for secresy, to bring on himself the strongest remonstrances; for Levy had always reckoned on Egerton's making a wealthy marriage,—leaving to Egerton the wife, and hoping to appropriate to himself the wealth, all in the natural course of business. Egerton did not listen to him, but hurried him on towards the place at which the ceremony was to be performed; and Levy actually saw the bride before he had learned her name. The usurer masked his raging emotions, and fulfilled his part in the rites. His smile, when he congratulated the bride, might have shot cold into her heart; but her eyes were cast on the earth, seeing there but a shadow from heaven, and her heart was blindly sheltering itself in the bosom to which it was given evermore. She did not perceive the smile of hate that barbed the words of joy. Nora never thought it necessary later to tell Egerton that Levy had been a refused suitor. Indeed, with the exquisite tact of love, she saw that such a confidence, the idea of such a rival, would have wounded the pride of her high-bred, well-born husband.

And now, while Harley L'Estrange, frantic with the news that Nora had left Lady Jane's roof, and purposely misled into wrong directions, was seeking to trace her refuge in vain—now Egerton, in an assumed name, in a remote quarter, far from the clubs in which his word was oracular—far from the pursuits, whether of pastime or toil, that had hitherto engrossed his active mind, gave himself up, with wonder at his own surrender, to the only vision of fairyland that ever weighs down the watchful eyelids of hard ambition. The world for a while shut out, he missed it not. He knew not of it. He looked into two loving eyes that haunted him ever after, through a stern and arid existence, and said, murmuringly, "Why, this, then, is real happiness!" Often, often, in the solitude of other years, to repeat to himself the same words, save that for *is*, he then murmured *was!* And Nora, with her grand, full heart, all her luxuriant wealth of fancy and of thought, child of light and of song, did she then never discover that there was something comparatively narrow and sterile in the nature to which she had linked her fate? Not there, could ever be sympathy in feelings, brilliant and shifting as the tints of the rainbow. When Audley pressed her heart to his own, could he comprehend one finer throb of its beating? Was all the iron of his mind worth one grain of the gold she had cast away in Harley's love?

Did Nora already discover this? Surely no. Genius feels no want, no repining, while the heart is contented. Genius in her paused and slumbered: it had been as the ministrant of solitude: it was needed no more. If a woman loves deeply some one below her own grade in the mental and spiritual orders, how often we see that she unconsciously quits her own rank, comes meekly down to the level of the beloved, is afraid lest he should deem her the superior—she who would not even be the equal. Nora knew no more that she had genius; she only knew that she had love.

And so here, the journal which Leonard was reading, changed its tone, sinking into that quiet happiness which is but quiet because it is so deep. This interlude in the life of a man like Audley Egerton could never have been long; many circumstances conspired to abridge it. His affairs were in great disorder; they were all under Levy's management. Demands that had before slumbered, or been mildly urged, grew menacing and clamorous. Harley, too, returned to London from his futile researches, and looked out for Audley. Audley was forced to leave his secret Eden, and reappear in the common world; and thenceforward it was only by stealth that he came to his bridal home—a visitor, no more the inmate. But more loud and fierce grew the demands of his creditors, now when Egerton had most need of all which respectability, and position, and belief of pecuniary independence can do to raise the man who has encumbered his arms, and crippled his steps towards fortune. He was threatened with writs, with prison. Levy said "that to borrow more would be but larger ruin"—shrugged his shoulders, and even recommended a voluntary retreat to the King's Bench. "No place so good for frightening one's creditors into compounding their claims; but why," added Levy, with covert sneer, "why not go to young L'Estrange—a boy made to be borrowed from!"

Levy, who had known from Lady Jane of Harley's pursuit of Nora, had learned already how to avenge himself on Egerton. Audley could not reply to the friend he had betrayed. And as to other friends, no man in town had a greater number; and no man in town knew better that he should lose them all if he were once known to be in want of their money. Mortified, harassed, tortured—shunning Harley—yet ever sought by him—fearful of each knock at his door, Audley Egerton escaped to the mortgaged remnant of his paternal estate, on which there was a gloomy manor-house, long uninhabited, and there applied a mind, afterwards renowned for its quick comprehension of business, to the investigation of his affairs, with a view to save some wreck from the flood that swelled momently around him.

And now—to condense as much as possible a record that runs darkly on into pain and sorrow—now Levy began to practise his vindictive arts; and the arts gradually prevailed. On pretence of assisting Egerton in the arrangement of his affairs—which he secretly contrived, however, still more to complicate—he came down frequently to Egerton Hall for a few hours, arriving by the mail, and watching the effect which Nora's almost daily letters produced on the bridegroom, irritated by the practical cares of life. He was thus constantly at hand to instil into the mind of the ambitious man a regret for the imprudence of hasty passion, or to embitter the remorse which Audley felt for his treachery to L'Estrange. Thus ever bringing before the mind of the harassed debtor images at war with love, and with the poetry of life, he disattuned it (so to speak) for the reception of Nora's letters, all musical as they were with such thoughts as the most delicate fancy inspires to the most earnest love. Egerton was one of those men who never confide their affairs frankly to women. Nora when she thus wrote, was wholly in the dark as to the extent of his stern prosaic distress. And so—and so—Levy always near (type of the prose of life in its most cynic form)—so by degrees, all that redundant affluence of affection, with its gushes of grief for his absence, prayers for his return, sweet reproach if a post failed to bring back an answer to the woman's yearning sighs—all this grew, to the sensible positive man of real life, like sickly romantic exaggeration. The bright arrows shot too high into heaven to hit the mark set so near to the earth. Ah! common fate of all superior natures! What treasure, and how wildly wasted!

"By the by," said Levy one morning, as he was about to take leave of Audley and return to town—"by the by, I shall be this evening in the neighbourhood of Mrs Egerton."

Egerton.—"Say Mrs Bertram!"

Levy.—"Ay; will she not be in want of some pecuniary supplies?"

Egerton.—"My wife!—Not yet. I must first be wholly ruined before she can want; and if I were so, do you think I should not be by her side?"

Levy.—"I beg pardon, my dear fellow; your pride of gentleman is so susceptible that it is hard for a lawyer not to wound it unawares. Your wife, then, does not know the exact state of your affairs?"

Egerton.—"Of course not. Who would confide to a woman things in which she could do nothing, except to tease one the more?"

Levy.—"True, and a poetess too! I have prevented your finishing your answer to Mrs Bertram's last letter. Can I take it—it may save a day's delay—that is, if you do not object to my calling on her this evening."

Egerton (sitting down to his unfinished letter).—"Object! no."

Levy (looking at his watch).—"Be quick, or I shall lose the coach."

Egerton (sealing the letter).—"There. And I should be obliged to you if you *would* call; and without alarming her as to my circumstances, you can just say that you know I am much harassed about important affairs at present, and so soothe the effects of my very short answers——"

Levy.—"To those doubly crossed, very long letters —I will."

"Poor Nora," said Egerton, sighing, "she will think this answer brief and churlish enough. Explain my excuses kindly, so that they will serve for the future. I really have no time, and no heart for sentiment. The little I ever had is well-nigh worried out of me. Still I love her fondly and deeply."

Levy.—"You must have done so. I never thought it in you to sacrifice the world to a woman."

Egerton.—"Nor I either; but" (added the strong man, conscious of that power which rules the world infinitely more than knowledge—conscious of tranquil courage)—"but I have not sacrificed the world yet. This right arm shall bear up her and myself too."

LEVY.—"Well said! but in the meanwhile, for Heaven's sake, don't attempt to go to London, nor to leave this place; for, in that case, I know you will be arrested, and then adieu to all hopes of Parliament—of a career."

Audley's haughty countenance darkened; as the dog, in his bravest mood, turns dismayed from the stone plucked from the mire, so, when Ambition rears itself to defy mankind, whisper "disgrace and a jail,"—and, lo, crestfallen, it slinks away! That evening Levy called on Nora, and ingratiating himself into her favour by praise of Egerton, with indirect humble apologetic allusions to his own former presumption, he prepared the way to renewed visits;—she was so lonely, and she so loved to see one who was fresh from seeing Audley—one who would talk to her of *him!* By degrees the friendly respectful visitor thus stole into her confidence; and then, with all his panegyrics on Audley's superior powers and gifts, he began to dwell upon the young husband's worldly aspirations, and care for his career; dwell on them so as vaguely to alarm Nora—to imply that, dear as she was, she was still but second to Ambition. His way thus prepared, he next began to insinuate his respectful pity at her equivocal position, dropped hints of gossip and slander, feared that the marriage might be owned too late to preserve reputation. And then what would be the feelings of the proud Egerton if his wife were excluded from that world, whose opinion he so prized? Insensibly thus he led her on to express (though timidly) her own fear—her own natural desire, in her letters to Audley. When could the marriage be proclaimed? Proclaimed! Audley felt that to proclaim such a marriage, at such a moment, would be to fling away his last cast for fame and fortune. And Harley, too—Harley still so uncured of his frantic love! Levy was sure to be at hand when letters like these arrived.

And now Levy went further still in his determination to alienate these two hearts. He contrived, by means of his various agents, to circulate through Nora's neighbourhood the very slanders at which he had hinted. He contrived that she should be insulted when she went abroad, outraged at home by the sneers of her own servant, and tremble with shame at her own shadow upon her abandoned bridal hearth.

Just in the midst of this intolerable anguish, Levy reappeared. His crowning hour was ripe. He intimated his knowledge of the humiliations Nora had undergone, expressed his deep compassion, offered to intercede with Egerton "to do her justice." He used ambiguous phrases, that shocked her ear and tortured her heart, and thus provoked her on to demand him to explain; and then, throwing her into a wild state of indefinite alarm, in which he obtained her solemn promise not to divulge to Audley what he was about to communicate, he said, with villanous hypocrisy of reluctant shame, "that her marriage was not strictly legal; that the forms required by the law had not been complied with; that Audley, unintentionally or purposely, had left himself free to disown the rite and desert the bride." While Nora stood stunned and speechless at a falsehood which, with lawyer-like show, he contrived to make truthlike to her inexperience, he hurried rapidly on, to re-awake on her mind the impression of Audley's pride, ambition, and respect for worldly position. "These are your obstacles," said he; "but I think I may induce him to repair the wrong, and right you at last." Righted at last—oh infamy!

Then Nora's anger burst forth. She believe such a stain on Audley's honour!

"But where was the honour when he betrayed his friend? Did you not know that he was intrusted by Lord L'Estrange to plead for him. How did he fulfil the trust?"

Plead for L'Estrange! Nora had not been exactly aware of this. In the sudden love preceding those sudden nuptials, so little touching Harley (beyond Audley's first timid allusions to his suit, and her calm and cold reply) had been spoken by either.

Levy resumed. He dwelt fully on the trust and the breach of it, and then said—"In Egerton's world, man holds it far more dishonour to betray a man than to dupe a woman; and if Egerton could do the one, why doubt that he would do the other? But do not look at me with those indignant eyes. Put himself to the test; write to him to say that the suspicions amidst which you live have become intolerable—that they infect even yourself, despite your reason—that the secresy of your nuptials, his prolonged absence, his brief refusal, on unsatisfactory grounds, to proclaim your tie, all distract you with a terrible doubt. Ask him, at least (if he will not yet declare your marriage), to satisfy you that the rights were legal."

"I will go to him," cried Nora, impetuously.

"Go to him!—in his own house! What a scene, what a scandal! Could he ever forgive you?"

"At least, then, I will implore him to come here. I cannot write such horrible words; I cannot—I cannot—Go, go."

Levy left her, and hastened to two or three of Audley's most pressing creditors—men, in fact, who went entirely by Levy's own advice. He bade them instantly surround Audley's country residence with bailiffs. Before Egerton could reach Nora, he would thus be lodged in a jail. These preparations made, Levy himself went down to Audley, and arrived, as usual, an hour or two before the delivery of the post.

And Nora's letter came; and never was Audley's grave brow more dark than when he read it. Still, with his usual decision, he resolved to obey her wish—rang the bell, and ordered his servant to put up a change of dress, and send for post-horses.

Levy then took him aside, and led him to the window.

"Look under yon trees. Do you see those men? They are bailiffs. This is the true reason why I come to you to-day. You cannot leave this house."

Egerton recoiled. "And this frantic foolish letter at such a time," he muttered, striking the open page, full of love in the midst of terror, with his clenched hand.

O Woman, Woman! if thy heart be deep, and its chords tender, beware how thou lovest the man with whom all that plucks him from the hard cares of the work-day world is a frenzy or a folly! He will break thy heart, he will shatter its chords, he will trample out from its delicate framework every sound that now makes musical the common air, and swells into unison with the harps of angels.

"She has before written to me," continued Audley, pacing the room with angry disordered strides, "asking me when our marriage can be proclaimed, and I thought my replies would have satisfied any reasonable woman. But now, now this is worse, immeasurably worse—she actually doubts my honour! I, who have made such sacrifices—actually doubts whether I, Audley Egerton, an English gentleman, could have been base enough to——"

"What?" interrupted Levy, "to deceive your friend L'Estrange? Did not she know *that?*"

"Sir!" exclaimed Egerton, turning white.

"Don't be angry—all's fair in love as in war; and L'Estrange will live yet to thank you for saving him from such a *mésalliance.* But you are seriously angry; pray, forgive me."

With some difficulty, and much fawning, the usurer appeased the storm he had raised in Audley's conscience. And he then heard, as if with surprise, the true purport of Nora's letter.

"It is beneath me to answer, much less to satisfy such a doubt," said Audley. "I could have seen her, and a look of reproach would have sufficed; but to put my hand to paper, and condescend to write, 'I am not a villain, and I will give you the proofs that I am not,'—never."

"You are quite right; but let us see if we cannot reconcile matters between your pride and her feelings. Write simply this:—'All that you ask me to say or to explain, I have instructed Levy, as my solicitor, to say and explain for me; and you may believe him as you would myself.'"

"Well, the poor fool, she deserves to be punished; and I suppose that answer will punish her more than a lengthier rebuke. My mind is so distracted, I cannot judge of these trumpery woman-fears and whims; there, I have written as you suggest. Give her all the proof she needs, and tell her that in six months at farthest, come what will, she shall bear the name of Egerton, as henceforth she must share his fate."

"Why say six months?"

"Parliament must be dissolved, and there must be a general election before then. I shall either obtain a seat, be secure from a jail, have won field for my energies, or——"

"Or what?"

"I shall renounce ambition altogether—ask my brother to assist me towards whatever debts remain when all my property is fairly sold—they cannot be much. He has a living in his gift—the incumbent is old, and, I hear, very ill. I can take orders."

"Sink into a country parson!"

"And learn content. I have tasted it already. She was *then* by my side. Explain all to her. This letter, I fear, is too unkind—But to doubt me thus!"

Levy hastily placed the letter in his pocket-book; and, for fear it should be withdrawn, took his leave.

And of that letter he made such use, that the day after he had given it to Nora, she had left the house—the neighbourhood; fled, and not a trace! Of all the agonies in life, that which is most poignant and harrowing—that which for the time most annihilates reason, and leaves our whole organisation one lacerated, mangled heart—is the conviction that we have been deceived where we placed all the trust of love. The moment the anchor snaps, the storm comes on—the stars vanish behind the cloud.

When Levy returned, filled with the infamous hope which had stimulated his revenge—the hope that if he could succeed in changing into scorn and indignation Nora's love for Audley, be might succeed also in replacing that broken and degraded idol—his amaze and dismay were great on hearing of her departure. For several days he sought her traces in vain. He went to Lady Jane Horton's—Nora had not been there. He trembled to go back to Egerton. Surely Nora would have written to her husband, and, in spite of her promise, revealed his own falsehood; but as days passed and not a clue was found, he had no option but to repair to Egerton Hall, taking care that the bailiffs still surrounded it. Audley had received no line from Nora. The young husband was surprised, perplexed, uneasy—but had no suspicion of the truth.

At length Levy was forced to break to Audley the intelligence of Nora's flight. He gave his own colour to it. Doubtless she had gone to seek her own relations, and by their advice, take steps to make her marriage publicly known. This idea changed Audley's first shock into deep and stern resentment. His mind so little comprehended Nora's, and was ever so disposed to what is called the common-sense view of things that he saw no other mode to account for her flight and her silence. Odious to Egerton as such a proceeding would be, he was far too proud to take any steps to guard against it. "Let her do her worst," said he, coldly, masking emotion with his usual self-command; "it will be but a nine days' wonder to the world —a fiercer rush of my creditors on their hunted prey——"

"And a challenge from Lord L'Estrange."

"So be it," answered Egerton, suddenly placing his hand at his heart.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"A strange sensation here. My father died of a complaint of the heart, and I myself was once told to guard, through life, against excess of emotion. I smiled at such a warning then. Let us sit down to business."

But when Levy had gone, and solitude reclosed round that Man of the Iron Mask, there grew upon him more and more the sense of a mighty loss. Nora's sweet loving face started from the shadows of the forlorn walls. Her docile, yielding temper—her generous, self-immolating spirit—came back to his memory, to refute the idea that wronged her. His love, that had been suspended for awhile by busy cares, but which, if without much refining sentiment, was still the master passion of his soul, flowed back into all his thoughts—circumfused the very atmosphere with a fearful softening charm. He escaped under cover of the night from the watch of the bailiffs. He arrived in London. He himself sought everywhere he could think of for his missing bride. Lady Jane Horton was confined to her bed, dying fast—incapable even to receive and reply to his letter. He secretly sent down to Lansmere, to ascertain if Nora had gone to her parents. She was not there. The Avenels believed her still with Lady Jane Horton.

He now grew most seriously alarmed; and in the midst of that alarm, Levy secretly contrived that he should be arrested for debt; but he was not detained in confinement many days. Before the disgrace got wind, the writs were discharged—Levy baffled. He was free. Lord L'Estrange had learned from Audley's servant what Audley would have concealed from him out of all the world. And the generous boy,—who, besides the munificent allowance he received from the Earl, was heir to an independent and considerable fortune of his own, when he should attain his majority—hastened to borrow the money and discharge all the obligations of his friend. The benefit was conferred before Audley knew of it, or could prevent. Then a new emotion, and perhaps scarce less stinging than the loss of Nora, tortured the man who had smiled at the warning of science ; and the strange sensation at the heart was felt again and again.

And Harley, too, was still in search of Nora—would talk of nothing but her—and looked so haggard and grief-worn. The bloom of the boy's youth was gone. Could Audley then have said, " She you seek is another's ; your love is razed out of your life ; and, for consolation, learn that your friend has betrayed you ? " Could Audley say this ? He did not dare. Which of the two suffered the most ?

And these two friends, of characters so different, were so singularly attached to each other. Inseparable at school—thrown together in the world, with a wealth of frank confidences between them, accumulated since childhood. And now, in the midst of all his own anxious sorrow, Harley still thought and planned for Egerton. And self-accusing remorse, and all the sense of painful gratitude, deepened Audley's affection for Harley into a devotion as to a superior, while softening it into a reverential pity that yearned to relieve, to atone ;—but how—oh, how !

A general election was now at hand, still no news of Nora. Levy kept aloof from Audley, pursuing his own silent search. A seat for the borough of Lansmere was pressed upon Audley, not only by Harley, but his parents, especially by the Countess, who tacitly ascribed to Audley's wise counsels Nora's mysterious disappearance.

Egerton at first resisted the thought of a new obligation to his injured friend; but he burned to have it, some day, in his power to repay at least his pecuniary debt: the sense of that debt humbled him more than all else. Parliamentary success might at last obtain for him some lucrative situation abroad, and thus enable him gradually to remove this load from his heart and his honour. No other chance of repayment appeared open to him. He accepted the offer, and went down to Lansmere. His brother, lately married, was asked to meet him; and there, also, was Miss Leslie the heiress, whom Lady Lansmere secretly hoped her son Harley would admire, but who had long since, no less secretly, given her heart to the unconscious Egerton.

Meanwhile, the miserable Nora, deceived by the arts and representations of Levy—acting on the natural impulse of a heart so susceptible to shame—flying from a home which she deemed dishonoured—flying from a lover whose power over her she knew to be so great, that she dreaded lest he might reconcile her to dishonour itself—had no thought save to hide herself for ever from Audley's eye. She would not go to her relations—to Lady Jane; that were to give the clue, and invite the pursuit. An Italian lady of high rank had visited at Lady Jane's—taken a great fancy to Nora—and the lady's husband, having been obliged to precede her return to Italy, had suggested the notion of engaging some companion—the lady had spoken of this to Nora and to Lady Jane Horton, who had urged Nora to accept the offer, elude Harley's pursuit, and go abroad for a time. Nora then had refused; for she then had seen Audley Egerton.

To this Italian lady she now went, and the offer was renewed with the most winning kindness, and grasped at in the passion of despair. But the Italian had accepted invitations to English country houses before she finally departed for the Continent. Meanwhile, Nora took refuge in a quiet lodging in a sequestered suburb, which an English servant in the employment of the fair foreigner recommended. Thus had she first come to the cottage in which Burley died. Shortly afterwards, she left England with her new companion, unknown to all—to Lady Jane as to her parents.

All this time the poor girl was under a moral delirium—a confused fever—haunted by dreams from which she sought to fly. Sound physiologists agree that madness is rarest amongst persons of the finest imagination. But those persons are, of all others, liable to a temporary state of mind in which judgment sleeps—imagination alone prevails with a dire and awful tyranny. A single idea gains ascendancy—expels all others—presents itself everywhere with an intolerable blinding glare. Nora was at that time under the dread one idea—to fly from shame!

But, when the seas rolled, and the dreary leagues interposed, between her and her lover—when new images presented themselves—when the fever slaked, and reason returned—doubt broke upon the previous despair. Had she not been too credulous, too hasty? Fool, fool! Audley have been so poor a traitor! How guilty was she, if she had wronged him! And in the midst of this revulsion of feeling, there stirred within her another life. She was destined to become a mother. At that thought her high nature bowed; the last struggle of pride gave way; she would return to England, see Audley, learn from his lips the truth, and even if the truth were what she had been taught to believe, plead, not for herself, but for the false one's child.

Some delay occurred in the then warlike state of affairs on the Continent, before she could put this purpose into execution; and on her journey back, various obstructions lengthened the way. But she returned at last, and resought the suburban cottage in which she had last lodged before quitting England. At night, she went to Audley's London house: there was only a woman in charge of it. Mr Egerton was absent—electioneering somewhere—Mr Levy, his lawyer, called every day for any letters to be forwarded to him. Nora shrank from seeing Levy, shrank from writing even a letter that would pass through his hands. If she had been deceived, it had been by him, and wilfully. But Parliament was already dissolved ; the election would soon be over ; Mr Egerton was expected to return to town within a week. Nora went back to Mrs Goodyer's and resolved to wait, devouring her own heart in silence. But the newspapers might inform her where Audley really was ; the newspapers were sent for and conned daily.

And one morning this paragraph met her eye :—

"The Earl and Countess of Lansmere are receiving a distinguished party at their country seat. Among the guests is Miss Leslie, whose wealth and beauty have excited such sensation in the fashionable world. To the disappointment of numerous aspirants amongst our aristocracy, we hear that this lady has, however, made her distinguished choice in Mr Audley Egerton. That gentleman is now a candidate for the borough of Lansmere, as a supporter of the Government ; his success is considered certain, and, according to the report of a large circle of friends, few new members will prove so valuable an addition to the Ministerial ranks ; a great career may, indeed, be predicted for a young man so esteemed for talent and character, aided by a fortune so immense as that which he will shortly receive with the hand of the accomplished heiress."

Again the anchor snapped—again the storm descended—again the stars vanished. Nora was now once more under the dominion of a single thought, as she had been when she fled from her bridal home. Then, it was to escape from her lover—now, it was to see him. As the victim stretched on the rack implores to be led at once to death, so there are moments when the annihilation of hope seems more merciful than the torment of suspense.

END OF THE THIRD VOLUME.

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My novel

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